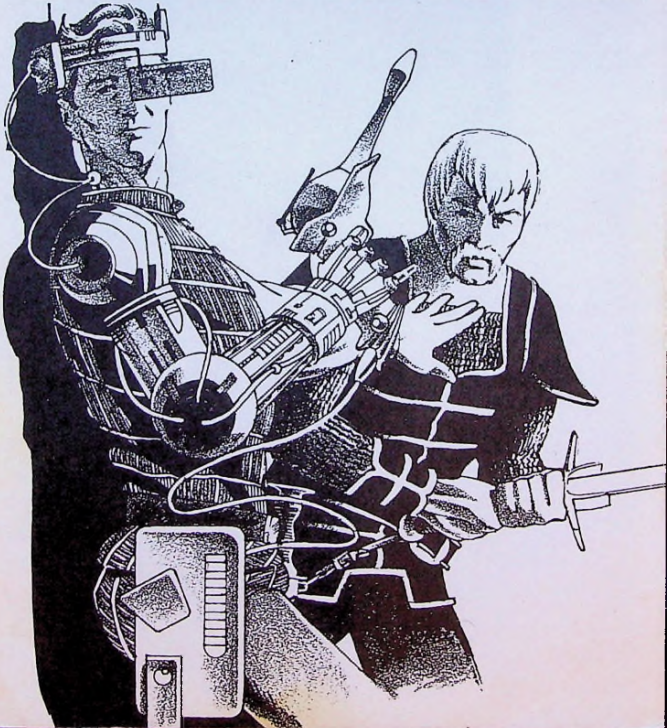
AMBERZINE

Issue #1 • March • 1992 • Ten Dollars



A very special group.

It was obvious, right from that first day in Milwaukee, on a Sunday morning in August of 1986.

They came from all over.

A couple of guys from Florida, two females from New Jersey, lone role-players from Indiana, Iowa, Minnesota, Vermont, Wisconsin and, of course, a trio from my home state of Michigan. Each came in response to the modest flyers I had posted in a half-dozen places around the convention.

Strangers.

It was the very first time that a group of strangers had come together to play the *Amber Diceless Role-Playing System*.

Sure, we had been playing in Detroit for nearly a year. But that was a home town crowd, packed with players from all my regular campaigns and previous play-tests.

These were strangers.

Critical strangers.

Carol Dodd was the harshest of the potential critics.

"Prove it," she seemed to be saying, "prove that you can run *Amber*, a place I know and love. Run it, and just try not make a fool out of yourself."

After a spirited Attribute Auction I faced one rough task of Game Mastery. The first time I ran *Amber* I allowed myself two weeks between creating the characters and starting play, plenty of time for figuring out player character background and parentage.

"You saw your father rarely while you were growing up," I told Carol, twenty-five minutes after the close of the Bidding War, "and Bleys was not there when your mother died. He showed up afterwards, and set you upon the Pattern..."

A few weeks later I received the first pages of *Bronwyn's Tale*. Flip to page 33 of this journal and read what I saw back then.

I knew I had to publish it.

Amberzine started there.

Erick Wujcik
March, 1992

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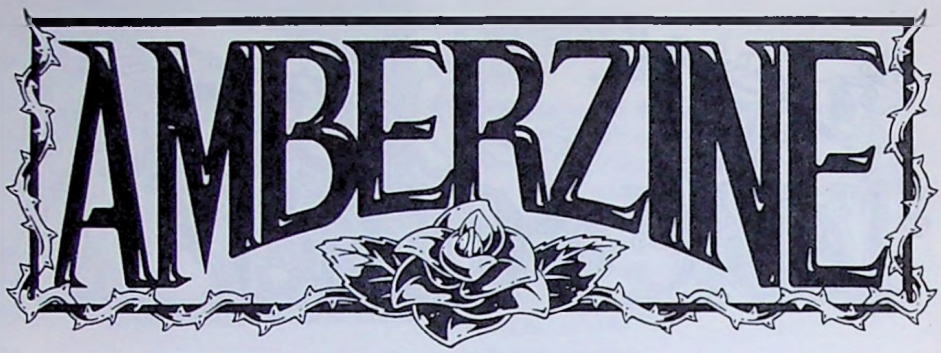

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NEWS & CONVENTION NOTES

Re-Print Time

By the time you read this the first printing (7,000 copies!) of *Amber* will have sold out. Do you want a copy from the second printing? Well, a lot of typos are corrected, but it probably won't have the same collector value...

Amber On-Line

The nation's computer networks are abuzz with word of *Amber*. Conferences and on-line sessions on CompuServe (a tip of the hat to Julia Frizzell for her help there!), and we've heard about *Amber* discussions on everything from InterNet to local bulletin boards.

Work In Progress

Upcoming projects include *Shadow Knight* by Cathy Klessig, based on the Merlin books. We're also working on Don Anderson's *Beyonders*, a chunky (300 plus pages) book on a distant realm beyond the influence of either Pattern or Logrus. Other upcoming titles are Debbie McCuen's *Chaos Rules!*, a complete guide to the Courts of Chaos, a group work called *An Amber Master's Guide to Trump*, detailing many different "vectors" of advancement in the most esoteric power, and Carol Dodd's *Not Quite the City of Brotherly Love*, about Amber and the Golden Circle.

CONDUIT

Salt Lake City, Utah

Oboy! On the weekend of May 15-17, 1992 you'll have the chance to see *both* Roger Zelazny and Erick Wujcik! They'll share panel space for an hour or two, in between Wujcik's crowded schedule of seminars and games. Tentative scheduling calls for Erick doing his "Wild Science" and "RPG 2000" seminars, plus an experimental game or two.

DragonCon

Atlanta, Georgia

Erick is supposed to be there July 17th - 19th, 1992.

GENCON

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

August 20-23, 1992, we'll see a whole ton-load of *Amber* folks from all over the country. It'll probably feature the biggest collection of *Amber* Game Masters ever! In addition to the *Amber* play, Erick Wujcik will also be presenting two all-new seminars. Check out "The Tactical Arts" and "One on One," in addition to a couple of old favorites.

Long-term plans...

1993 still seems a long way off. *Ambercon IV* is coming in March. And Erick and Kate are already signed up for the ConFrancisco World SF Con.

Display Advertising in Amberzine

Although our numbers are low—we print a mere one thousand (1,000) copies of each issue—Amberzine provides our advertisers a means of targeting the most enthusiastic and discriminating of potential customers.

Display advertising is available in full pages only. The rate is $100 per page. Sorry, there are no frequency, agency or quantity discounts available. Payment in advance is mandatory.

All advertising should be provided to Phage Press as "camera ready," in clear black and white copy. However, as a service to those lacking press & production facilities, Phage Press will create advertisements to order. This requires the submission of the text, any illustrations, and full instructions, well in advance of publication.

Color reproduction, inserts, custom art, and other special requirements will necessitate a substantial additional charge.

As *Amberzine* is printed at a size of six inches wide by nine inches tall, all submissions should be designed to fit these proportions. A universal border of one half inch is recommended, thereby reducing the total size of your advertisement to five inches by eight inches. Although there is no extra charge for reducing your original, provided the proportions are correct, we do ask that you specify exactly what reduction you would like.

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The frequency of publication is eccentric. *Amberzine* will be published at the discretion of the publisher.

Since the scheduling of *Amberzine* is somewhat unconventional, it is difficult to specify an exact deadline date for inclusion in the next issue. Phage Press respectfully suggests that anyone seeking more specific chronological data should write to the address below.

Phage Press unabashedly reserves the right to reject any advertisement for reasons of taste or esthetics. For example, we prohibit the use of coupons, "tear-outs," and other encouragements to the defacing of the magazine (our readers are perfectly capable of corresponding their wishes in a conventional letter). However, Phage Press welcomes the inclusion of advertising from our direct competitors in the role-playing market or elsewhere.

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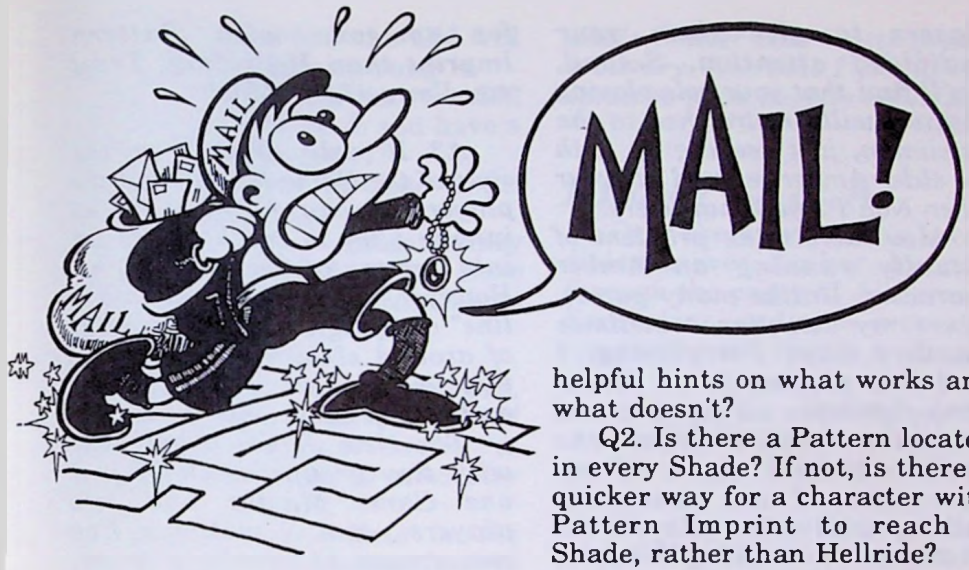

Dear Phage Press,

You asked people to write, so I did! First of all, I'd like to say thank you. This is the game I never knew was possible, yet was always searching for. My Troupe has been dying for a game that puts role-playing above roll-playing (i.e.: performing the character rather than rolling dice and using calculators). It seems that many players want that, but the big companies just can't hear the demand. Small, lean companies like Phage can (and do) deliver what the role-playing community wants. For that I thank you.

Now to the messy part: questions.

Q1. What are your thoughts on GM-controlled player characters? I would like to GM *Amber*, but I'd also like to run a character. Can I? Should I? Any helpful hints on what works and what doesn't?

Q2. Is there a Pattern located in every Shade? If not, is there a quicker way for a character with Pattern Imprint to reach a Shade, rather than Hellride?

Q3. What, in your opinion, is the optimum size group of players for *Amber*? Three? Ten? Thirty?

Jon D. Wilkie
The Evergreen State College
Olympia, Washington

Dear Jon,

Thanks for your letter! When all the major game companies turned down Amber, saying that a diceless game was not "commercial" enough, I knew there were gamers like yourself out there.

To your questions...

A1. Frankly, I've always been opposed to GMs bringing their own player characters into a campaign.

In Amber it's much worse. First, because Amber is so subjective, you owe it to the

players to give them your undivided attention. Second, you'll find that your role-playing abilities will be stretched to the maximum, just keeping up with the elder Amberites and all your other Non-Player characters.

Also there's the problem of actually running an Amber character. Unlike many games, where my attention sometimes wanders when I'm playing, I find that playing in an Amber campaign takes all my time and attention. Aside from the complexity and depth of my characters, I am constantly talking with other players (in character), taking notes, plotting, scheming, and just plain paying attention.

A2. No, there is only one Pattern. Just the one located in the basement of Castle Amber.

Oh, wait a minute. I suppose there are actually three Patterns. Add Rebma and Tir-na Nog'th. So there are exactly three Patterns. Period.

Hmmm... Well I suppose there are four, what with the Primal Pattern. So, just four.

Um, five! Corwin's Pattern...

As you can see, any Game Master can extend the "absolute" number of Patterns.

However, I'd find "a Pattern in every Shade" to be pushing it a bit. Shadows are the product of Pattern. Still, if it tickles you to put an infinite number of Patterns out there... well, it's your Amber.

No, there is no quicker way for someone with Pattern Imprint than Hellriding. Trust me, I'm a Game Master.

A3. It really depends on the style of the Game Master and the players. Because Amber is so intense I try to break things up into groups of seven or eight. However, in my personal "main line" campaign there are a total of around sixteen players, split into two separate groups. I run each group about once a month.

The New Jersey cabal runs with tiny groups, often of just one Game Master and two players. And sometimes I've run groups of twenty or more, but only when the players are able to spend a lot of time interacting with each other.

Erick

Greetings,

I'd like to begin with a short but heartfelt piece of fawning adoration. This is the most fascinating role-playing game I've seen in my fourteen years of gaming. I've *never* before read a rulebook from cover to back. Well, I did skip ahead to the elder Amberites - who wouldn't? - but I went right back to where I left off.

Now that that's out of the way, I have a question about applying advancement points for Attribute Rank progress. The rules state that the character ranked first can advance but would have no way to know how many points until the next rung. Nowhere (that I've found yet) do

the rules state how the GM will know where the next rung is.

Is it your intent that the GM just make it up, or do you have a recommended system?

Sincerely (or as close as an *Amber* GM can get),

Brian Stanley
Grand Forks Air Force Base
North Dakota

Dear Brian,

Ooo, "fawning" adoration, my absolute favorite kind! Thanks for your letter, it definitely warmed an otherwise frigid day...

If there's one hole in the system that's been pointed out to me most often, it's what to do with characters when they advance past first Rank.

One solution is taking the idea of the "ladder" of Attribute Rankings and extending it up through the elder Amberites (or other NPCs). Then the players' must then match the "rungs" of the older generation.

Another way is by letting the "number one" forge their own way upward, creating "rungs" for the others to follow. This assumes that, regardless of where the "top" turns up, sooner or later a player or NPC is going to overreach the maximum. By the way, if the original first place bidder stalls a couple of times, while someone at "1.5" keeps pushing, then I let that other player create the next "rung."

Or, if the GM is particularly nasty (i.e. Amber-like), then the whole matter can be completely arbitrary. Not that I would ever admit to such lawless behavior...

Erick

Amber Q & A

Over the years there's been a dialogue over *Amber*, by mail, through the pages of *Alarums & Excursions*, and even over some computer nets. Here's a sample:

Susan E. Jones
The University of Chicago
Chicago, Illinois

Q1. ...you encourage players and GMs to ultimately move away from any sort of point system or structure. I am curious as to how players are induced to give their characters any weaknesses, and how such things as advancement or progress toward goals are evaluated. Having never seen this style of play I have perhaps missed the point completely, but it seems as if the game eventually takes on some of the elements of the Society for Creative Anachronism, improvisational theater, and creative writing workshops.

A1. I suppose a lot of it has to do with educating the players.

Invulnerable one-dimensional comic book heroes are attractive to the very young, but as readers get older they demand more complex characters with vulnerabilities. Likewise role-playing gets more interesting when characters

have distinct personalities and built-in disadvantages.

From a more story-oriented perspective, in my more recent role-playing experiments I've "run""the players through the creation of their characters with a series of life choices.

Last year, for example, I ran something I call "In-Country," which takes place in the 2040's. Each character is created first by the player filling out a questionnaire. Based on their answers I figure out a character's parents and social status. From that point it becomes a matter of choices.

Paul Deckert's character was the son of aging, unemployed, blue-collar folks in the rust-belt of 2001 (using his chosen age and working backwards). He was a good student, stayed out of trouble, and managed to swing enough aid to get into college in 2019. There he found that all the "rich" kids had neural implants, something he couldn't possibly afford. His choices then became rather dire; dropping out and going on the dole, joining the military, or signing up for an "experimental" implant with the human biology department.

He flunked out and tried to get a job. Three years later, his position on the job waiting list having dropped from nine years to thirteen years, and his food ration dropped by another twenty percent (painful, since he had a large character), he ended up in the military.

Skipping ahead another couple of years we find his character as a corporal in charge of a "riot control" unit on the streets of San Francisco. When a unarmed parade of Constitutional Rights activists move toward his position, he is faced with a nasty assortment of choices. Paul ended up killing over a hundred unarmed men, women and children. Which made him a national "hero."

The result was a character with a depth of feeling, and to whom the other player characters would have a certain ambivalence...

Q2. In those sections dealing with Shadow I got a sense that in the game Shadow was a little too easily manipulated, or perhaps 'dominated' would be a better word. Zelazny himself built in a few limitations to Amberites' control of Shadow. For example, Corwin, in *The Guns of Avalon* when he had found his pseudo-Avalon observed, "...I had achieved the physical analogue of the world of my desire and would now have to operate within the prevailing situation." In *The Hand of Oberon* he tells Vialle, "Personality is the one thing we cannot control in our manipulations of Shadow." In *Trumps of Doom* Merlin at one point resorts to a mundane airplane since, "Short-cutting through Shadow would not work, because I'd never been there before and didn't know

how to find the place." Such limitations strike me as natural and I would certainly take them into account in players' dealings with Shadow.

A1. Quite.

I like your quotes, so let me address them individually.

Corwin admits that he found the "world of his desire," and therefore was limited. In the game I try to point out that when you change too much you slip out of your Shadow. Likewise the Shadow he's dealing with is one that is strengthened by an Amberite, so becomes far less subject to Pattern manipulation.

When Corwin speaks of "personality" I think he's talking about the disposition of Amberites and other "real" folk. Likewise when one is manipulating Shadow, one can't define every detail, so the Amberites personality tends to fill in the details.

As to Merlin's statement, I freely admit that the book is based only on the **Chronicles**. *I'd make the claim that Merlin is still pretty inexperienced. Certainly I can think of a dozen reasons why he should be able to make a Shadow short-cut. Then again there's always the possibility that Merlin may not be telling the whole truth...*

In any case, I always treat the "malleability" of Shadow, like most things in Amber, as conflicts. Where there is no resistance by any other character, an Amberite can mold Shadow with impunity. Resistance starts when Shadow has been lent "form" by another Amberite (even one's own creation). Gradually, as Shadow becomes more and more "real" with the interference of Amberites, manipulation becomes more and more difficult.

Mark Goldberg
Alarums & Excursions

Q1. There seem to be some standard major plot-lines (such as "Blood On the Pattern" and "Eric/Brand Returns") that crop up a lot. Is this to be expected/encouraged/discouraged/prevented in the game?

A1. Fact is, the ideas you mention are pretty common in the tournaments, cross-overs, and introductory Amber games. That's because they are themes that most of the players can easily identify, and, in a limited-time game, that keeps things moving.

In campaign play the stories rarely dwell on the conventional tournament-style adventures.

Q2. A virtue of Amber (as Spike described it) is how many players it can handle at one time, and how the players are inspired to get into their roles. Is there rules encouragement for this, or were the playtest just anomalous?

A2. I like to think the rules

mandate detailed player involvement. Likewise, once the player's are comfortable with their characters, it's easy and fun for them to interact with a minimum of Game Master interference.

Late Sunday night at GENCON 1990, I offered to run a cross-over Amber game. And I ended up with fourteen players! A little steep for any single Game Master. However, once player characters were introduced to each other, they could happily role-play independent of my actions. For example, after BRONWYN (Carol Dodd) was introduced to HERDAN (Chuck Knakal) early in the game, I'd say they spent at least two solid hours of role-playing without my involvement (though, granted, they are two exceptional players and two of the most seasoned characters).

Q3. In the novels, Oberon is the *only* one depicted as sleeping around indiscriminately; most Amberites are decidedly careful about their partners. But certain Princes would be excessively popular parental choices. Will players get to choose PC backgrounds? With or without restrictions/input from the GM?

A3. I don't know how you can say that about Oberon. After all, the guy had a couple of ***thousand*** *years to while away. Zelazny only itemizes a dozen of Oberon's partners, which, spread over a mere 1200 years, works out to a new woman every 100 years. Hardly what I'd call indiscriminate.*

You want "sleeping around?" Corwin had a minimum of three lovers within five years. And he spent most of his time locked up in Dungeon Amber.

In your other question you ask if players will get to choose their own backgrounds. I assume you mean parentage. In which case the answer is no, they won't. My view is that the one thing nobody can choose is their own parents. There are detailed rules for the Game Master to "fit" player characters to their existing Amber parents.

Spike Y. Jones
Alarums & Excursions

Q1. A *completely* dice-less game will surprise a lot of people; has any thought been given to a merely simplified or reduced system (a la Prince Valiant's coin-flipping)?

A1.In my mind, any chance-based decision making system, built into a game, makes that game a dice game. I don't care if it's coin flips, spinners, dice of any number of faces, or a computer's random number generator. I can build a combat table on any kind of chance mechanism you'd care to mention. So, a game is either diceless, or it is not.

Why?

Again, in my mind, all role-playing games boil down to some

essential story. The Game Master is the story-teller, or novelist, and the players are the characters. In Amber, each game master must attempt to simulate the story-telling process of Roger Zelazny.

Zelazny doesn't roll the dice to see what Corwin is going to encounter, or to see if Corwin takes a fatal wound from one of the faceless warriors on his many battlefields. No, Corwin's encounters are based on what is important to the movement of the story (what it will reveal about his quest, for example), or on what Corwin needs to discover about himself.

Likewise, Corwin is never really in danger from the vast majority of mortal opponents. So why waste time with them? No, the only time that Corwin is in danger is when he fights someone significant. Like his brothers Eric, Gérard or Benedict, or a Lord of Chaos.

Q2. The Auction system wouldn't be much fun for 1 or 2 players. While okay at relatively rare conventions, would there be another way to create/introduce new characters mid-stream?

A2. Yes, you need at least a few players to have an effective character auction. Fortunately, it's not that difficult for most people to gather that many gamers together.

Creating a character "mid-stream" is easy enough. Just treat them as if they hadn't bid anything in the auction. The disadvantage is that, like anyone else who secretely "bids up," they'll always be a little behind the auction winners. On the other hand, they'll be able to create their characters with a little more foresight. It balances out.

We did that with a couple of people at AMBERCON 1990, folks who couldn't make it to the character auction. Their characters worked out fine.

Q3. How much of what Zelazny deliberately left obscure will be cleared up?

A3. Nothing, folks, absolutely nothing.

I'm proud to say that, after five years of intensive play-testing of the game, the players are more confused now about the Amber universe than when they started.

One way I measure my success with the game, is from the number of people who go back to reading the Chronicles of Amber, and find things even murkier than before.

For example, one guy, after playing for a couple of years, re-read the series again. What was different? He tried looking at all the events as if Corwin was accurate (though biased) and as if Brand were the hero and Caine was the true villain. Accoding to him, everything makes more sense that way than the other way around.

I think part of the magic of

Amber is that there are so many fascinating mysteries. Even stuff that seems clear in the books, will likely be obscured in the game.

Q4. Would the game allow (or even encourage) playing non-Amberites in another Shadow, with Amberites appearing (infrequently) as powerful NPCs, with the possible inclusion of items dragged in from other Shadows?

A4. Gee, given the chance to play such fun characters, the offspring of the royal family of Amber, I don't know why anyone would want to play anything else.

If you really wanted to, I suppose you could...

Colin Ingham
Alarums & Excursions

Q1. Too much emphasis on story-telling seems to result in a conspiracy between GM and players to arrive at a mutually agreeable solution. I want to be shocked and perturbed sometimes, and the chance element helps.

A1. I've got a flash for you, Colin. You don't need dice to be shocked or perturbed. As a Game Master I'm always floored by the player's actions, and interactions. The way Amber works is sort of like Chaos Theory. There are no random variables, but the innate complexity of the game system and Amber Universe result in totally unpredictable events.

Lee Gold
Alarums & Excursions

Q1. Will the game have any maps of Shadow realms showing nearness to Amber?

A1. Maps? We don't need no stinking maps!

Um... Sorry, I couldn't help myself.

I have a lot of trouble picturing a map of infinite multi-dimensional space. Fortunately, we don't need any. All Shadows can be defined just as you said, in terms of nearness to Amber. How long it takes to Hellride from Shadow "A" to Amber exactly defines the Shadow's distance from Amber.

Q2. I like the idea of a campaign set in Shadow because it would put the intrigue and conspiracy of the Amber Court far off enough to let all the PCs form a party of allies. And because it would mean those who has not read the books wouldn't be at such a disadvantage. And because it would set the initial energy level fairly low. It's MUCH easier to escalate power level than to diminish it.

A2. Well, go for it! You can set your campaign anywhere you like.

Personally, I like the idea of

a campaign racked with intrigue, bursting with power, and with the player characters barely able to tolerate each other. But that's just me...

I can't argue that it's easier to bump power than lower it. However, even the fairly staggering powers of the new Amber characters are wimpy when measured against their elders in Amber.

Q3. The Amber books seemed to involve endless chapters of people meditating/discussing Who Did It and Why and Who Else Was In On It, with at least a dozen suspects. At the end of the book, it seemed that there had been twenty pages of action and the author had filled up the rest of the pages to the publisher's order with alternate conspiracy theories. The setting seemed worthy of something better in the way of plotting.

A3. Yes, the books are chock full of conversation and speculation. But wouldn't you say that's what most role-playing games lack? After all, role-playing games are basically a social activity, between some pretty interesting people. So why are the games, all too often, reduced to petty shot-'em-ups?

True, some people find reading about the Amber discussions boring. But participating in that kind of discussion is a lot more interesting than reading about it...

Q4. One night, some years ago I saw a car with no lights blocking my lane. I slammed on the brakes and waited for the crash, with trembling fingers. My car did a smuggler's turn. Barry has a better theory of backgammon but I'm luckier with dice. We each win about half the time. Then there's the weather and wrong numbers and other random stuff. Do you eliminate this aspect of life or leave it up to the inspiration of the GM? I prefer resolving some of it using random generators like dice.

A4. Oh boy, I hardly know where to start.

Let me answer in three parts. One literary, one metaphysical, and one based on the Amber mechanics.

First, the literary. Imagine reading a book where you spend fifty pages getting involved with a lively, interesting, and sympathetic character. You're really starting to enjoy the book, and suddenly, halfway through the book, the main character dies. Seems he wasn't quick enough hitting the brakes.

Doesn't make for a very satisfying read.

You'll probably accuse me of making an unfair analogy. I agree, it is unfair.

But that's the way books, and story-telling, works.

There are books where characters can fry at the drop of a paragraph. And there are

games where the combat system is so realistic that player characters can drop dead from a surprise attack at any moment.

The metaphysical. It may seem that we live in a universe filled with random incidents. But, in fact, most everything that happens is the result of consequences. It just seems random because we're not aware of what's happening elsewhere.

As John Brunner once said, coincidence is when you didn't know the other half of what was going on...

Game mechanics.

Remember, we're talking about Amber. And Pattern.

Pattern gives one control over probability. And Chance. So Amberites can control probability. Player characters, and the NPCs, are constantly manipulating events.

Also, there's the game mechanic called Good Stuff and Bad Stuff. Any player can spend points on Good Stuff, and therefore get the character a bank of good luck. Or, they can take Bad Stuff in exchange for extra points, and therefore get the character a corresponding dose of bad luck. In other words, you can buy that dice luck for your character.

Looking back on the above, I'm profoundly dissatisfied. I don't feel like I'm answering your question. Maybe next time...

Robin D. Laws

Alarums & Excursions

Q1. Why does Amber in particular have to be diceless?

A1. When I started designing the Amber game, I followed my own rules for role-playing design. I kept everything as simple as possible, and only added rules when I felt they were absolutely necessary.

Same thing with dice. I had decided that I'd just wait until I ran into the situation (which, at the time, I figured was inevitable), where I'd need them.

It happened that the character creation system didn't require dice. The combination of the character auction, and the point-based construction system, made dice unnecessary. Then the combat system was constructed with the attribute matching system. And I decided that the power should be automatic, with failure only possible through outside intervention.

And when all was said and done, I ended up with a game that had no dice.

It works for me...

Julia Frizzell
CompuServe

Q1. ...what have you done for floor plans for Castle Amber?

A1. There will be none. At least none in the conventional "D&D" style.

Partly this is because of a changing attitude toward maps in general. I, and a lot of other game masters, don't really use 'em anymore. This is because we approach role-playing games more as "stories" than "computer games."

Castle Amber is, to me, a locus point for events. Not a map for wandering monsters.

A good analogy is Zelazny's presentation of Tir-na Nog'th. When Corwin goes through his visit there, his encounters are not based on a map, but rather on those things he must find, on those events that he must discover. Corwin finds a living Lorraine not by taking the right path on a map, but because he must see, and reflect upon, this alternate version of his life. Because that is an important part of his' story, and of his character's growing awareness of his own personality.

To me Castle Amber will always be a rambling, sprawling, mess of a construction. In my mind it will always be an accumulation of millennia, never completely knowable, always an enigma. Fortunately, that's an image that we can get across in fiction, and in role-playing games.

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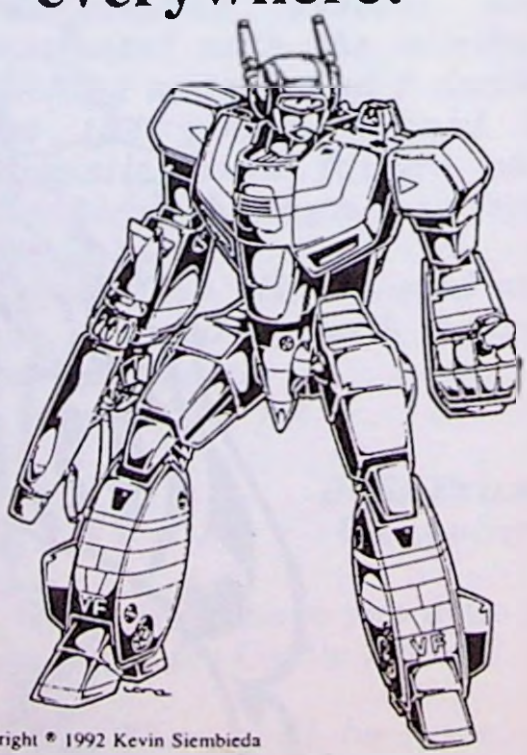

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Zelazny's Santa Fe

by Jane M. Lindskold

When I disembarked from my plane in Albuquerque, New Mexico, I walked from the gate to meet Roger Zelazny, a slim, dark-haired man wearing black jeans and a maroon flannel shirt.

I had traveled to New Mexico to interview Zelazny for the critical biography I am writing on his works for Twayne. In some ways, the trip could have been seen as unnecessary. Zelazny and I had been corresponding regularly since 1988 and had met a few times, including a trip he had made as a Thornton Writer to Lynchburg College in Virginia where I'm an English professor.

However, as I had explained to the Faculty Research and Development Committee which granted the funding for my trip, Roger Zelazny is a writer with a strong sense of place. I wanted the opportunity to interview him and see an area where he has set parts of many of his works.

Zelazny was quite willing to indulge my peculiar research strategy and, despite poor weather, we managed to see most of the places in the Santa Fe area that he has featured in his novels. Many of these are integrated into the latter five Amber novels, but other novels, most notably *Bridge of Ashes* have also drawn on the Santa Fe setting.

Zelazny is a fascinating tour guide. Casual in dress and manner, he still manages an undefinable, gentlemanly air. This does not exclude an active sense of humor that ranges from the dry to the grotesque and into a fondness for puns and word-play. During my visit, he usually would meet me after dropping his two younger children, Trent and Shannon, at school. Then we would visit parts of the area, usually ending up in his study talking about books - his and others.

The first part of our tour began with the hotel in which I was staying. La Fonda calls itself "the Inn at the End of the Santa Fe Trail" and is among the oldest structures in Santa Fe. Legend says that Billy the Kid worked there as a dishwasher. However, for a fan of Zelazny's novels, La Fonda is remembered as the place from which Roderick Leishman assassinates the governors of Colorado and Wyoming. As we walked around the outside of the hotel, Zelazny explained how he had carefully checked the location so that he could be

certain that Leishman could shoot the governors and then make his escape from the spot in the fashion described in the book.

Leaving La Fonda, we walked over to the Hilton, passing as we did the local Indians spreading their wares - mostly jewelry and pottery - out on blankets under the portal of the Palace of the Governors. The Hilton is the place where Luke and Merlin both stay in *Trumps of Doom*. We walked through the bar and Zelazny pointed out the table where Luke and Merlin had stopped for drinks. As breakfast wasn't served in the bar, we didn't sit at their table, but after eating we walked through the hotel. Zelazny pointed down the corridor to where Luke's room (which Merlin breaks into) was located and mentioned that the Mr. Brazda, who Merlin asks for directions, had been the manager of the hotel at the time the book was written.

After touring the Hilton, we walked outside and followed the same route across parking lots and side streets that Merlin and Luke had when in *Trumps of Doom* Luke decides that he has his "heart set on a place around the corner" for dinner. We arrived at La Tertulia before they opened for business, but again Zelazny could indicate the precise table where he had set Merlin and Luke's dinner and attendant conversation. His singular attention to detail gave the characters and events a peculiar vividness and I found myself almost believing that we might turn a corner and see the two grandsons of Oberon ambling along in front of us.

Another setting we visited was the notorious site of the ambush set by the ty'iga in the guise of Dan Martinez. Zelazny said that the idea for that scene came when driving down from the Santa Fe ski basin one night and noticing how many sharp curves there are along that road and how many places the road simply drops off. Certainly, the place that he showed me would have been an ideal place to lose a body or bodies permanently.

A fascinating part of this particular jaunt was Zelazny's explanation of how Shadow Shifting works. The ski basin is over 3,000 feet above the "lower" 7,000 foot elevation of Santa Fe. During the drive up the mountain towards the basin, the climate actually appeared to change. This change was particularly visible in early November when I made my trip because of the natural transition between seasons. At the base of the mountain many of the trees still bore bright yellow foliage and what little water there was remained unfrozen. Higher up, however, the season shifted into winter. Turning a curve, as Zelazny's van climbed the twisting road, revealed snow where before there had been none. Higher still, the road was

covered with ice.

This, Zelazny explained, is similar to how the Shadow Shifts work. An initiate of the Pattern walks down a road and imagines that around the bend there will be snow or flowers. If this occurs, then the initiate has not just rounded a bend in the road, but has shifted into a different reality. To use Zelazny's mountain road analogy, a shift between an autumn road without snow and one with is easy because such a change is highly probable. To shift the same autumn road to one covered with flowers is harder, because the shift is less probable and, therefore, quite difficult. This last usually would only take place in the circumstances of a Hellride when the shifter is so pressured that the power and effort used to warp reality is incidental when weighed against the considerations of speed or a desire not to be followed.

This, Zelazny explained, is similar to how the Shadow Shifts work. An initiate of the Pattern walks down a road and imagines that around the bend there will be snow or flowers. If this occurs, then the initiate has not just rounded a bend in the road, but has shifted into a different reality.

After descending from the ski basin, we stopped in at the former Wheelwright Museum of Art where Zelazny did much of the early research for *Eye of Cat*. As we walked through the exhibits, Zelazny explained how the prevalent Indian culture of Santa Fe and of New Mexico in general had given him the impetus to write *Eye of Cat*. Interestingly, in the novel's original outline Billy Singer, the novel's protagonist, was a Hopi Indian. However, as Zelazny did more research into the various Southwestern Indian cultures, he decided that the Navajo Indian's renowned adaptability better fit his story. Still, in order to give Billy a touch of exoticism and a tie to the Pueblo peoples, Zelazny made Billy's father a Taoseño. Zelazny's research for *Eye of Cat* went beyond books and museums. With a Navajo guide, he toured the Canyon de Chelly in Arizona, especially the Canyon del Muerto branch, the setting of the final chapters of the novel.

As mentioned earlier, our tours would often end with a stop by Zelazny's study. There we would have coffee and talk about his works and other interests. Zelazny's study is a fair-sized

library, several stacks deep. In fact, so much of the large room (it was converted from the house's original two car garage) is given over to books that the way to get to the work area by the large picture window is through a fairly narrow walking space. Books line the walls and a small shelf to the right of Zelazny's easy chair holds the half a dozen or so books he is currently reading. These include at least one volume of poetry, a biography, a science-related text, and a science fiction or fantasy novel. To the chair's left a low table holds a mass of papers and books which effectively bury his small computer. Nearly all of Zelazny's writing is done on a typewriter that he either balances on his lap or puts on his desk. The desk is built into the wall and faces the picture window that looks out over a small patio and then over the piñon and juniper dotted slopes of the Sangre de Christo mountains.

These mountains provide the major inspiration for Zelazny's Hugo award winning story "24 Views of Mt. Fuji, by Hokusai." They also modelled for Todd Cameron Hamilton's drawing of Mount Kolvir on the title page of *The Visual Guide to Castle Amber*.

Zelazny's study provides many indications of his broad, eclectic interests. Besides the books, there are numerous comics and graphic novels. He's a particular fan of *Grimjack* and wrote the introduction for the *Grimjack* graphic novel *Demon Knight*. Grimjack himself gets a cameo in *Blood of Amber* as Old John the man with "a nasty-looking scar running both above and below his left eye" (page 55) who has done work for both Oberon and Random. Another Zelazny favorite is *Sandman*. Neil Gaiman, the creator and writer for *Sandman*, has commented that some of Zelazny's work provided inspiration for his Unending.

Assorted bits of martial arts paraphernalia are tucked in corners, including Zelazny's hakama (a black canvas robe) and jo (a short staff). Zelazny holds a black belt in Aikido and has studied several other martial arts over the years. In a basket by the study door, a mixture of bean bags and balls testifies to one of Zelazny's odder hobbies - he is a fair juggler. He also knows a wide variety of string tricks. (When he visited Lynchburg College, during a long wait in a restaurant he pulled a bit of string from his pocket and began doing variations on the cat's cradle).

The desk is framed by several awards and pieces of art. The art changes regularly - during my visit the central piece was the Hannes Bok illustration painted as the cover for *Fantasy and Science Fiction Magazine's* November 1963 issue containing Zelazny's novelette *A Rose for Ecclesiastes*. The Polly Jackson painting of a red '57 Chevy,

which modelled for both the painting Merlin owns and provided the car that he encounters in *Knight of Shadows* and *Prince of Chaos*, is displayed in the master bedroom. Zelazny also owns one of the woodcuts in the Yoshitoshi Mori "Face to Face" series, similar to the one that Eric "borrows" from Corwin. Another interesting portion of his art collection are various decks of cards drawn by artists inspired by the Amber Tarots. One of the largest among these is the Benedict Tarot done by Todd Cameron Hamilton for *The Visual Guide to Castle Amber*, which is actually a beautifully detailed painting roughly eighteen by thirty inches.

Zelazny also owns one of the woodcuts in the Yoshitoshi Mori "Face to Face" series, similar to the one that Eric "borrows"

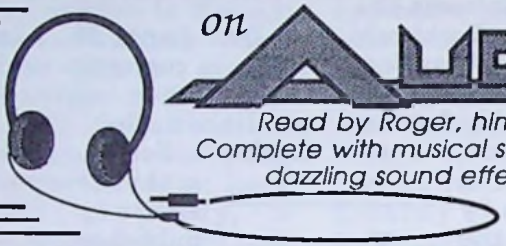
When I departed New Mexico, I had a greater appreciation for the way in which Zelazny creates his novels. The blurring of the lines between painstakingly accurate reality and fantasy help to make his novels, the Ambers in particular, come so vividly alive. When you can walk across the parking lot from the Hilton to Guadaloupe Street, turn and intersect Alameda, walk past a church, turn a corner and see La Tertulia down the street, the possibility that a turn in a mountain road made in the company of just the right person will take you across the realities and into Amber doesn't seem so improbable.

Dr. Jane M. Lindskold, PhD., is currently working on a book, *Roger Zelazny*, to be published by the Twayne Author's Series, probably the most respected of literary biography publishers. How did this come about? As Jane says, "A chance letter I wrote, the only fan letter I've ever written in my life, led to an exchange of letters with Roger." Eventually, "about six months later, it made sense to go and take a look this person with whom I'd corresponded, and we became friends." Jane is also an avid role-player. Having yet to experience *Amber* role-playing, Jane's favorite character is Captain-when-it's-on-the-ground Tavara Java, owner of her own merchant ship, the 400 ton "Moonage Daydream," in the science fiction campaign run by her husband, David Davies.

In *Amberzine #2* we expect to publish Jane's "All Roads *Do* Lead to Amber," a discussion of the elements that Zelazny draws from myth and legend into his books.

HUGO AND NEBULA AWARD WINNER

Roger Zelazny on Audio



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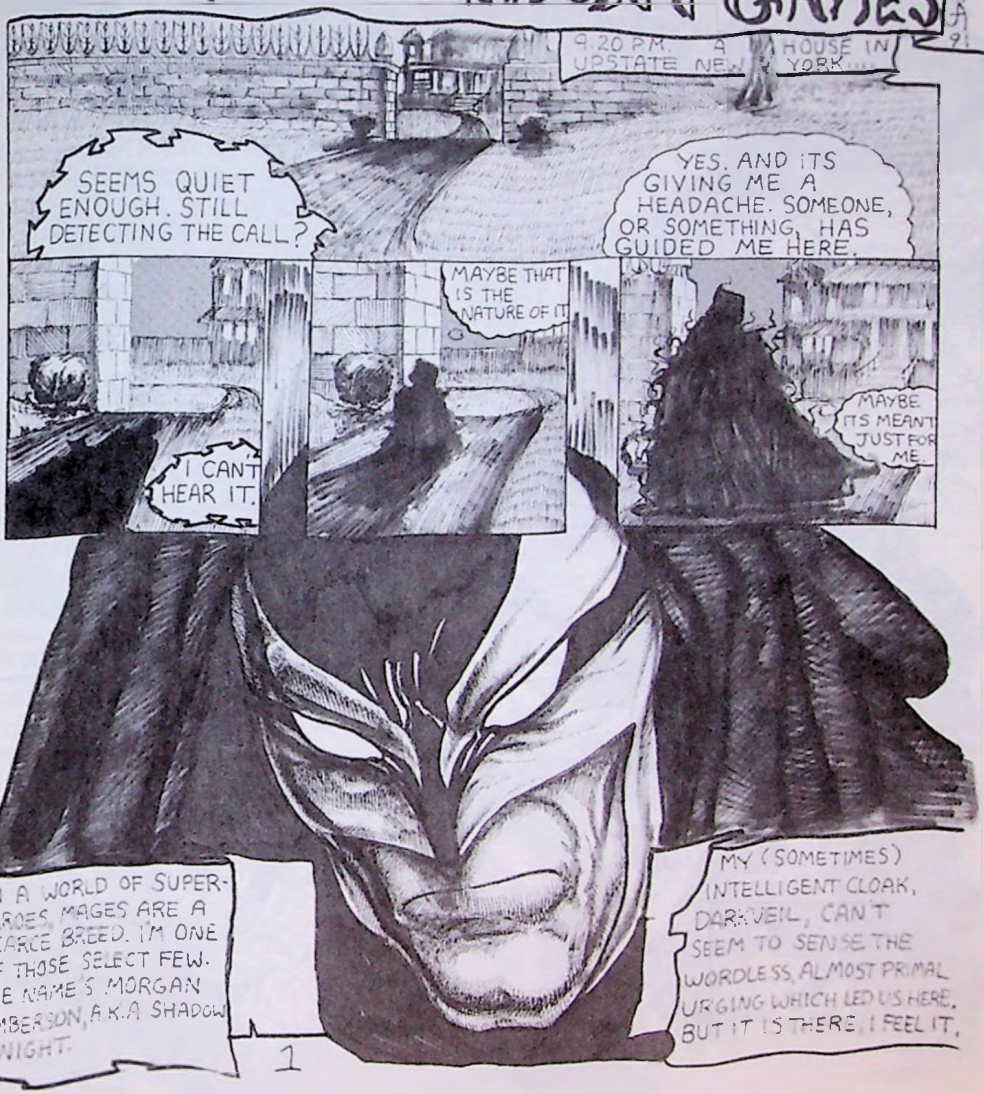
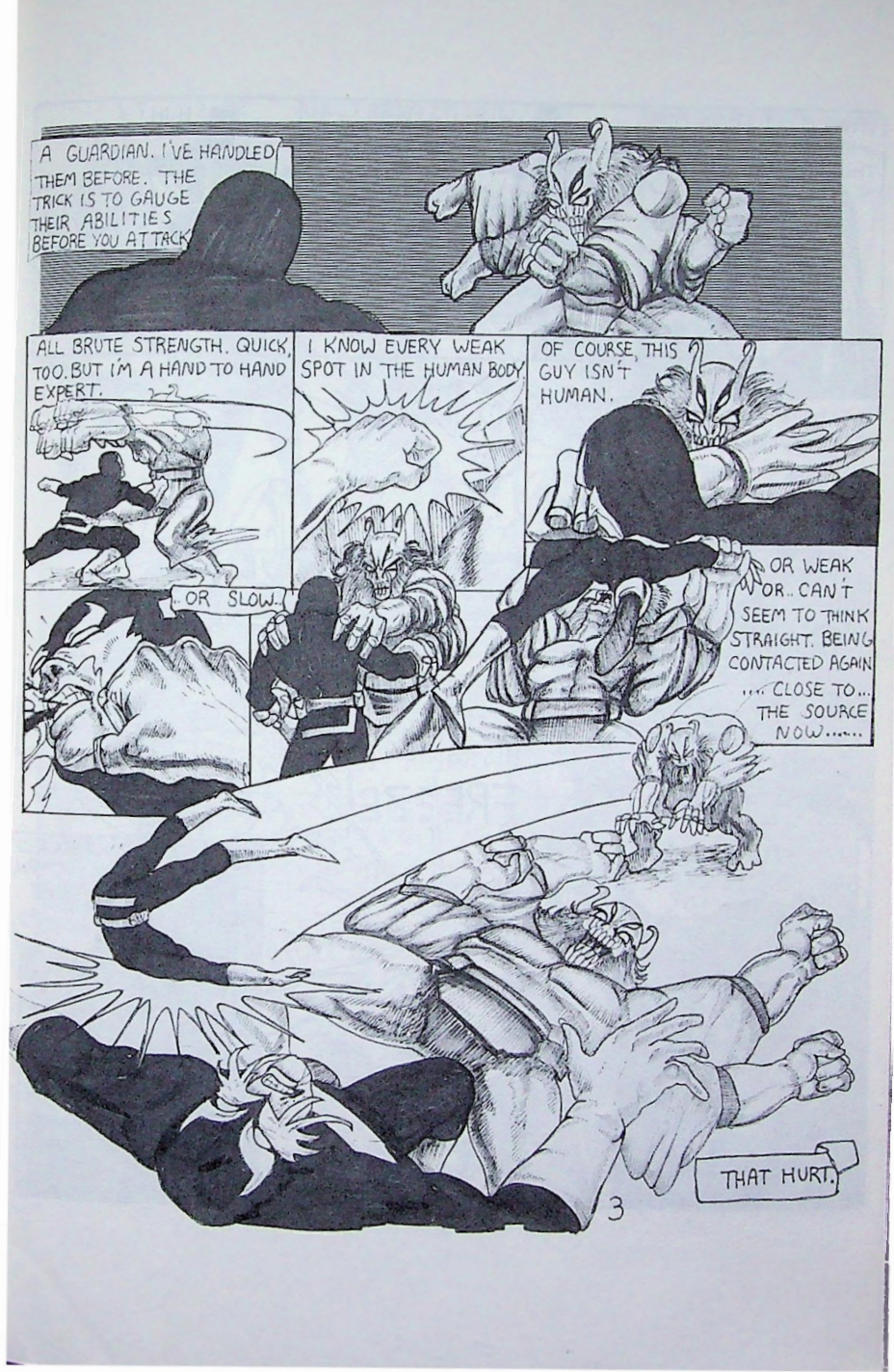
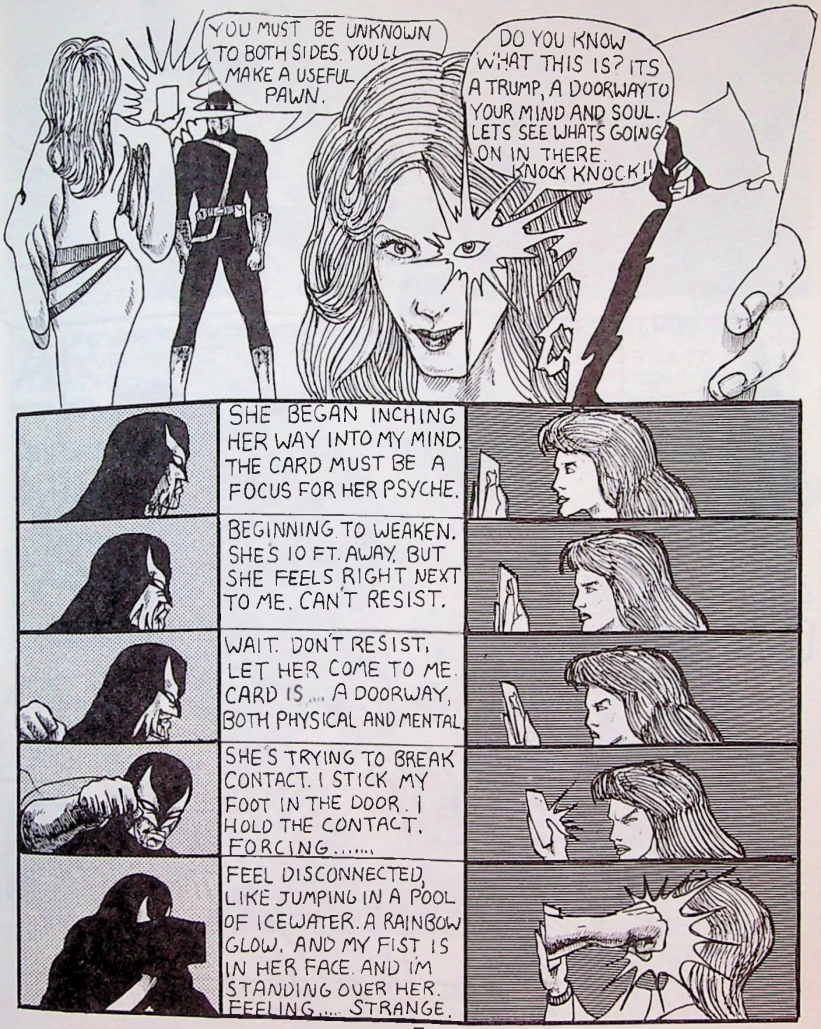

9.20 P.M. A HOUSE IN UPSTATE NEW YORK
SEEMS QUIET ENOUGH. STILL DETECTING THE CALL?
YES. AND ITS GIVING ME A HEADACHE. SOMEONE, OR SOMETHING, HAS GUIDED ME HERE.
I CANT HEAR IT.
MAYBE THAT IS THE NATURE OF IT
MAYBE ITS MEANT JUST FOR ME.
IN A WORLD OF SUPER-HEROES MAGES ARE A SCARCE BREED. I'M ONE OF THOSE SELECT FEW. THE NAME'S MORGAN AMBERSON, A.K.A SHADOW-KNIGHT.
MY (SOMETIMES) INTELLIGENT CLOAK, DARKVEIL, CAN'T SEEM TO SENSE THE WORDLESS, ALMOST PRIMAL URGING WHICH LED US HERE, BUT IT IS THERE, I FEEL IT,

I SENSE A WARD.
YES. LET ME PUT ON MY SUNGLASSES.
WHOA!!
SOMEONE'S PLAYING FOR KEEPS! ITS A BAR AGAINST POWER OBJECTS. ARTIFACTS CROSSING THIS WILL BURN UP IN THEIR OWN MYSTICAL JUICES. THIS IS A POTENT CASTING. I'M GOING TO HAVE TO CROSS THE WARD AND TRY TO DISPEL IT FROM THE INSIDE.
LOOKS LIKE YOU SIT THIS ONE OUT.
AFFIRMATIVE.
IMAGES LEAP INTO MY MIND AS I SWIM THROUGH THE SPELL. I THINK OF THE SPIRAL PATH, WHICH I TRAVERSED IN MY
INITIATION AS SHADOW KNIGHT. I'D USED ITS POWER TO FUEL SOME OF MY OWN SPELLS, AND I SEE THE SAME
DESIGNS IN THIS CASTING, BUT MORE PERFECTED. MY SUMMONER IS
A MAGE, A MENTALIST AND, IF HE'S SMART, HE'LL HAVE


A GUARDIAN. I'VE HANDLED THEM BEFORE. THE TRICK IS TO GAUGE THEIR ABILITIES BEFORE YOU ATTACK.
ALL BRUTE STRENGTH. QUICK, TOO. BUT I'M A HAND TO HAND EXPERT.
..OR SLOW..
I KNOW EVERY WEAK SPOT IN THE HUMAN BODY.
OF COURSE, THIS GUY ISN'T HUMAN.
..OR WEAK OR.. CAN'T SEEM TO THINK STRAIGHT. BEING CONTACTED AGAIN .... CLOSE TO... THE SOURCE NOW.....
THAT HURT.

PAIN! MUST THINK. MIND WHIRLING, SPINNING, LIKE THE SPIRAL PATH....
WISH ITS POWER COULD MAKE THIS JOKER VANISH!
HUH?
TUT TUT THAT WAS VERY NICE YOU KNOW
A WOMAN APPEARING FROM A RAINBOW DOOR. AND SHE'S SPEAKING THE MAGETONGUE!
MOVING GARFLIN TO THE NEXT SHADOW OVER.
* TRANSLATED FROM THARI.
THIS IS HOW, EINSTEIN!
FREEZE!
ONE WORD FROM HER, AND I CAN'T MOVE! DAMN!
SHE'S THE SUMMONER, I CAN FEEL IT! BUT HOW HAS SHE BEEN DOING IT?
KNOWLEDGE THE PATTE AND NOT POWER WORDS
AHH!


YOU MUST BE UNKNOWN TO BOTH SIDES. YOU'LL MAKE A USEFUL PAWN.
DO YOU KNOW WHAT THIS IS? ITS A TRUMP, A DOORWAY TO YOUR MIND AND SOUL. LETS SEE WHATS GOING ON IN THERE. KNOCK KNOCK!!
SHE BEGAN INCHING HER WAY INTO MY MIND. THE CARD MUST BE A FOCUS FOR HER PSYCHE.
BEGINNING TO WEAKEN. SHE'S 10 FT. AWAY, BUT SHE FEELS RIGHT NEXT TO ME. CAN'T RESIST.
WAIT. DON'T RESIST, LET HER COME TO ME. CARD IS.... A DOORWAY, BOTH PHYSICAL AND MENTAL.
SHE'S TRYING TO BREAK CONTACT. I STICK MY FOOT IN THE DOOR. I HOLD THE CONTACT, FORCING.....
FEEL DISCONNECTED, LIKE JUMPING IN A POOL OF ICEWATER. A RAINBOW GLOW. AND MY FIST IS IN HER FACE. AND I'M STANDING OVER HER. FEELING.... STRANGE.

INTERESTING FIREWORKS.
ARGH!
COME IN. ITS SAFE NOW.
ABOUT TIME!
HMMM. YOU LOOK LIKE HELL. WHAT HAPPENED?
NEVER MIND. WHAT DO YOU MAKE OF THIS?
IT'S A CARD.
VERY FUNNY. I'M TALKING ABOUT THE BACK OF IT.
NOW WHERE HAVE WE SEEN ONE OF THOSE BEFORE?
IT'S A REPRESENTATION OF A UNICORN.
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Bronwyn: "I like to spend mornings in the library when I am at Court, because the big east-facing windows look out over the sea toward Cabra, and, if they are open, you can smell the tang of salt in the air and hear the gulls calling to each other."

BRONWYN'S TALE

By Carol Dodd

(An Amber Log, Based on a Scenario by Erick Wujcik)

Copyright 1992 - C. Dodd

"In memory of Arthur E. Dodd, Senior,
1918-1988, thank you for believing."

I remember that particular morning well, although, to be honest, there was as yet no hint of trouble in the air. I was sitting in the main library hall in Amber.

I like to spend mornings in the library when I am at Court, because the big east-facing windows look out over the sea toward Cabra, and, if they are open, you can smell the tang of salt in the air and hear the gulls calling to each other. This room seems brighter than the others in this old castle, which always strikes me as being as dark and secretive as the people who live here.

I was in Amber for the Bird Show. My owls always take their share of prize money in the competitions and this year I had several fine hunters to sell. The show was profitable for me and I was well pleased with myself, idling the morning away with a pot of coffee and a spy novel.

A breeze rippled in just then, ruffling the pages of my book, and the door to the hall, behind me, opened a crack -- just enough to let me hear the argument that was going on in the hallway, outside.

"It doesn't make any difference. I don't care if she is your daughter. She'll have to go with the rest of them." My Aunt Fiona's voice was full of sharp edges.

"I just don't think it's necessary, Fiona. I'm absolutely certain she has nothing to do with it!"

I froze. It was my father who was speaking. I suppose I should have been glad to hear him defending me from whatever I was being accused of doing, or should have kept my big mouth shut and waited for more information, but Dad always brings out the worst in me. We're oil and water and that's that.

"No, really, Bleys, I'm afraid I must insist! We can't afford to make any exceptions or take any chances. I've made the same arrangements for Damarian, you know that."

"But, Fiona...."

"No buts, Bleys, she goes with the rest of them!"

Now I hadn't known Dad was in Amber, and wouldn't have come here myself, if I had. I hadn't seen Bleys in years, which was fine by me. But since I was here, and he was here, I figured it was about time I said the few choice words I'd been saving up for the occasion.

I don't remember getting from my chair to the door -- just flinging it open and swooping between them. I think they were surprised. Dad, at least, seemed startled and a little put out to see me there. Fiona just looked like something small and slimy had crawled out of a crack. I don't like her either.

Let me just say that I don't care for most of my relatives, and that takes care of a considerable amount of people. I'm absolutely lousy with family, and most of them are pretty bad news.

Uncle Random is the King, and while I'm not real friendly with him, I must admit that he makes a pretty decent ruler. We are nominally at peace with just about everybody, since he took the Crown -- including the Courts of Chaos, our oldest and strongest enemy -- which is saying rather a lot. He does a pretty good job.

Fiona is my father's full sister, all the rest being halves, because my grandfather really got around. He had a whole bunch of kids; some are dead and some are missing, but most of them show up from time to time and sometimes they bring kids of their own, to walk the Pattern when they're ready, or have come of age or whatever. The Pattern is very dangerous. Sometimes they die. I guess their blood is thin.

The only one I really like is Uncle Caine. When I was a kid, he was my-uncle-the-sea-captain, and my one and only claim to fame in our small coastal village. He used to show up from time to time the way sailors do, and bring presents and money for my mother and me, usually during the long intervals when it seemed that my father had forgotten we were alive.

He was the one who told me stories, and the one I used to threaten bullies with. I never knew he was a prince.

Having managed to put my father off balance by my sudden appearance, I went straight for the throat.

"Hello, Daddy dearest," I snarled.

"Bronwyn!"

"Obviously! Where the hell were you when my mother died? I sent for you!"

He reddened. It makes him look like a tomato. All red.

"Ah...now, Bronwyn, look, you know how these things are. By the time I got your message it was all over...and, I...."

"Didn't think it was worth the trip to sympathize with me!" I

finished for him.

"It's not like that," he protested.

"Right!" I said crisply. "Hello, Aunt Fiona. My, what an...interesting... dress."

I hoped I had dug low enough to insult her, but she wasn't having any.

"That's enough of your nonsense, Bronwyn. We have a serious situation here, and frankly, I don't have time to trade insults with you. I'm not altogether certain you're not a part of this, in any case. Bleys," she ordered, "tell her what she's to do."

"What are you talking about?" I demanded. "I didn't even know you were here."

"I'm sure it doesn't concern you," he said quickly, taking me by the arm and trying to hustle me down the hallway. "But we have to take every reasonable precaution to make sure you don't become involved. This is really for your own protection."

I shook myself loose. He could have held me easily, but he wasn't expecting any resistance (he never does) and I pulled away rather abruptly and ungracefully. My shoulder hit the opposite wall with a thud that was louder than I expected. I don't like being handled.

The pair of guards who were loitering down the hall a ways, apparently waiting for Bleys and Fiona, looked up then. One of them took a couple of steps in our direction, but Dad waved them away.

"Do we have to have one of these scenes every time I see you?" he hissed. "Just once in your life, can't you do as I say?"

He reached for my arm again, and I dodged, but he was ready this time.

"Come...with...me...now!" he snarled, and I knew he was through playing the patient Daddy. I had made him angry. I always do.

"Where...?" I asked. "And why?"

"For pity's sake," Fiona snapped, "I've had enough of this! Guards!"

She's having me arrested for smarting off to him, I thought wildly, and measured the distance between me, and them, and the library door. I didn't have much of a chance, and Dad still had me by the arm.

"Have you finally lost your mind?" I yelled, as they flanked me. "I demand to see the King!"

He didn't look at me. "Take her down to the dungeons," he said, "and lock her up with the others."

I exploded into a frenzy that surprised even me. I broke away from Dad and raised my hands to defend myself in the only way I know. Fiona was quicker. She grabbed my wrists and dug in her nails.

"Don't let her touch you," she cautioned the guards. "Bleys, help me..." and they hustled me off between them. I did not go quietly. Nevertheless, I went.

I like a flashy entrance. I like to think my fellow-inmates were entertained, at least, by the spectacle I must have presented as they dragged me in, kicking and cursing, and chained me up against the wall.

"I'll get you for this, you bastard!" I screamed at Dad, as he fastened the manacles around my wrists.

"Everything will be explained to you in the near future," he said, and he turned and followed Fiona back up the stairs. He had left me just enough slack to sit down on the floor if I wanted, and a whole lot of seething rage.

When the red fog that was clouding my vision faded a bit, I took a sneaky glance around at my surroundings and my companions. They all pretended to be looking somewhere else. I wondered if they had all taken part in a similar scene and were trying to afford me whatever privacy my misery demanded.

They were an unlikely lot to be found chained in a dungeon, a rather pleasant looking group on the whole. There were eight men and one woman, none of whom looked particularly dangerous to me. This is how I met my cousins.

We sat there, in varying degrees of outrage and stony silence...take your pick. No one was offering any introductions.

Suddenly the guards came back, dragging another shuffling, gibbering burden along. They were followed by two other men, both of whom I knew by sight from my infrequent visits to Amber. They were some sort of relatives, I thought vaguely, obviously not prisoners.

But the thing that riveted my attention was the pitiful wretch they escorted. They flung him into a chair in the center of the cell, just out of our reach. I realized, with a cold, sick feeling in the pit of my stomach, that my Uncle Caine was also a prisoner.

Everyone began talking and shouting at once. I guess almost everyone recognized Caine. One of the men, chained somewhere against the back wall, called out, "Dad!" and I tucked that away for future reference. Others shouted questions. But Caine just cringed in his chair and whimpered like a whipped dog. The two men who had helped to bring him in watched impassively, from the other side of the bars. One of them had set up an easel, and began making some sketches.

I realized he must be a Trump artist. Somebody was making sure they could get us back here in a hurry if we ever got away. I had no desire to sit for a portrait in my present condition, but there

wasn't much of a choice. I shouted a warning to the others, though, who responded with a mixture of curses and threats that made us all feel a lot better, even if they were unimpressive, from ten people chained against the wall.

The artist was unperturbed. He finished his work, packed up his easel, and left. His companion stayed a bit longer, I guess until he was satisfied that we were properly riled. We were. Finally, he left too.

A murmur of silence followed, almost as jarring as the racket that had gone on before. Caine sat slumped in his chair, muttering to himself and gaping like an idiot. We eyed each other...no one was offering any information...I guess we all were waiting for someone else to come up with a brilliant suggestion.

The children of Amber are bred to suspicion and distrust. I wondered what they had done to bring them to such a pass.

'This is getting me nowhere, fast,' I decided. 'Waiter, check, please.' I closed my eyes and pulled the fiery configuration of the Pattern into my inner vision. Through the central vortex I projected a deep tunnel, cut through Shadow. Somewhere out there, there had to be a key that was the duplicate of the one that locked the shackles on my wrists.

The dingy cell faded around me, as I mentally examined and discarded dozens of keys similar to the one I sought. Finally, I found the one that felt right, so I reached out my hand and plucked it from the pocket of a guard who would never even notice it was gone. I turned it in my palm and fitted it into the lock at my wrist. It took some tricky maneuvering, but eventually the lock clicked open. Right hand free, I reached across and unlocked the left manacle.

I dropped the key in my lap and massaged my wrists vigorously, mentally preparing myself to repeat the process and draw in a key to the bars that separated me from the stairway and freedom.

"Ahem...." I was aware that the man chained to my left was looking at me with a rather curious expression on his face.

"Oh, what the heck," I murmured. "Here, pass it on. Try to be quiet, will you?"

There was a small, subdued stir as the key made its rounds. One by one, my fellow inmates freed themselves, except for the woman chained opposite me, who was chivalrously extracted from her manacles by the young man next to her. They had been talking on and off, during our confinement. I figured they must be lovers or something. I can't imagine anyone being that friendly with a relative.

"Quick!" said the man to my left. "Can you make another key for the lock on the bars?"

"I didn't 'make' that one, and I can't do it 'quick'," I muttered,

settling myself for another search. But I was distracted when two of the others began to move towards Caine.

He began gibbering loudly then, and cringing away from them in terror. One of them shouted, "Dad, it's me, Delian." Caine whimpered and cowered in his chains.

"What are you doing?" I snarled. "Be quiet! Do you want the whole palace down here?"

"We've got to take him with us!"

"*We* don't have to do anything of the sort. I'm not going anywhere with you. Once I get the bars unlocked, I'm gone, and the rest of you can do anything you like. Just keep him quiet while I concentrate."

There is no honor among Amberites, I am convinced. I am really very fond of Uncle Caine, but expediency is a stronger god than affection.

That's just about when I ran out of luck, but things do get a little fuzzy at this point. As I slipped back into my trance, the screams erupted about me again. I opened my eyes to see the bars to our prison crashing in, torn apart by something that looked like a cross between a demon and a dinosaur of modest proportions. Shards of iron hung crazily from the ceiling and the floor, backlighted by strange, flickering lights that seemed to dart about the room in a random fashion.

I screamed then, myself, and so did Caine, as the thing lunged across the cell towards his chair. Delian and one of the others tried to block its path, and we watched with helpless horror as the creature picked him up and threw him against the wall, where he landed with a sickening crunch.

Someone shouted behind me, and I turned to see another of the beasts; it had paused at the broken bars of our prison, effectively blocking my escape. A third was clumping down the stairs towards the chamber.

Bedlam reigned. Everyone was yelling or screaming. Most of the men jumped into the fight to protect Caine, but some, like me, were trying to crawl away. The woman on the other side of the chamber was holding a conversation with nothing, as far as I could see. I guess we all went a little mad.

The first monster disposed of our feeble opposition in seconds. I guess I knew what was coming, but I couldn't close my eyes or turn my head. The beast reached its clawed arms toward Caine, who screamed horribly, once, then choked away into silence, as the creature tore his head from his body and flung it across the room, splattering everything with blood.

I lost it then. There is a point where my mind will run away, even when my body cannot. I drew the Pattern around me like a

curtain and lost myself in the swirling fire.

Someone was shaking my arm. I resented that. I was safe and comfortable where I was, and I vaguely remembered that it hadn't been that way, wherever I had been before.

"Are you all right? Open your eyes!" someone was insisting. The snap back to reality was sickening.

The man who had been chained on my left was shaking me so hard my teeth rattled in my skull. When he saw I was conscious, he dropped me abruptly and turned back to the scene that was before us. My knees buckled, and I sat down hard on the stone floor, trying to make sense of what I saw.

Caine's headless body remained in the chair, still dripping with gore. Standing over it, with a grim, satisfied expression on his face...was Caine.

I blinked. What's wrong with this picture? (I made a mental note to keep a tighter control on my escape hatch. What had I missed? This could be dangerous.) Everyone was pretty much where they had been when I blinked out, so it was safe to assume that not too much time had passed. Of course, they were all firing questions at the central figure in this tableau, who seemed to be enjoying himself hugely. The monsters at the entrance and on the stairway were still in place, unmoving now, but they didn't look dead. So this was no rescue. Then...what?

The smell of blood was very strong.

Caine (the one with a head) strode across the cell, propped Delian up in the corner, and began slapping him awake, none too gently. When it seemed that Delian was coming around, he spoke, over his shoulder, to the rest of us.

"O.K., kids, now shut up and listen. I'll try to explain as much as I can, but time is short, so start getting back in those chains while I'm talking."

"When pigs fly," I muttered.

Delian groaned, so Caine stopped beating him conscious and dragged him up to a standing position against the wall, slapping the manacles back on his wrists. The poor guy was confused, I think, and didn't offer any resistance, but the rest of us were understandably reluctant to follow suit. So Caine started moving around the chamber, making sure we were following orders.

Our protests were quelled by a muffled bellow: "I said, 'Shut up!'"

When Caine was sure he had our attention, he began pacing around the cell, sort of thinking out loud as he went.

"It's a real funny situation. Nobody knows exactly what's going on, but it seems that Amber is under attack." He growled a wordless warning, as the noise level rose again. "No, not an army this time, at least, not as far as anyone can tell. But all kinds of strange

creatures out of Shadow have been moving on our borders. Some have actually been seen in town. Just small raids, but bad enough to make us think that someone's got plans for us that we're not gonna like."

"So far, it's nothing we can't handle. But it's been getting worse lately, and it looks as if we're going to have to take some action."

"What's that have to do with us?" somebody wanted to know.

"Nothing comes out of Shadow unless something opens a way for it," he shot back. "Something or someone with Oberon's blood in his veins."

He ignored ten pleas of "Not guilty!" with a grin I remembered well. As he talked, he moved from one of us to the other, checking our bonds.

"Bleys and Fiona felt that all avenues of attack had to be eliminated, immediately. Anyone with access to Shadow had to be rounded up and watched."

"Who's watching Bleys and Fiona?" I burst out. I was instantly sorry, because he noticed me then, and also the fact that I hadn't locked myself back up.

"Well, if it isn't Bronwyn! Your devotion to your father is touching, dear, but you're forgetting one thing. My brothers and sisters are all sworn to the preservation of Amber. We took the oath together. We may not agree on anything else, but we all agree on that."

"So what's the big deal?" someone ventured. "You admit that the raids are nothing you can't handle."

"Look, just let me go and I'll swear any oath you like. You'll never see me again! I didn't ask to come here in the first place!" This from a dark young man in the corner. For the first time, I noticed he was dressed in white, cutoff denims and a baggy shirt whose impossible print showed blue palm trees against a lurid pink sunset. I decided I liked him, which was weird, because he was both a stranger and a relative.

"No way!" I had seen that grin on Caine's face once, years ago, as he'd waded in to break up a dockside fight on the Cabra quay. He was having fun!

"You kids all have to be chained up here to the wall, just like they left you. When the guards come back and find the body," he gestured to the headless corpse, "it's sure to be seen as another attack, and it's the best alibi you can have."

He stood in the middle of the cell, arms outstretched, grinning as though we should all share the joke.

"You can't possibly be involved if you're all still in chains. They'll have to let you go!"

"What *is* that anyway?" Delian's voice sounded dull through a fat

lip. He gestured to the headless corpse.

Caine shrugged. "Some creature out of Shadow. We all have doubles out there. Someone apparently thought that Caine, gone mad, would add to the confusion. I've been away for awhile, watching this situation develop. The usual rumors had begun to circulate...that I was dead. Somebody planted a ringer."

The question hung in the air, unspoken: how do we know that isn't the real Caine, and you're not the Shadow? Caine seemed to sense it, so he answered.

"You don't," he said softly.

He was moving towards me now, snapping manacles as he went.

"What are we supposed to tell the others when they come back and ask what happened?"

"Why, just tell them the truth. Three monsters broke in, tore the place apart, and killed your poor old Uncle Caine. Be angry! Be outraged! After all, it's a miracle they didn't kill you, too!"

I thought his grin was particularly nasty, so I tried to keep from shaking as he approached.

"Uncle Caine, I really don't want to be locked up again," I pleaded, trying to look as harmless as possible.

He smiled, and I smiled back at him.

"Bronwyn, just be a good girl, and shut up, and do as you're told."

I shut up. Snap...right wrist...snap...left wrist. Satisfied, he gave me a pat on the head and strode out of the cell, taking his monsters with him. When I was out of arm's reach I called out one more question.

"What does Random have to say about all this?"

He turned and looked back at us. The smile was gone.

"You'll have to ask your father about that," he told me. Then they disappeared up the stairway.

There was one half-minute of desperate silence. And then, of course, everyone began talking at once.

Mingled exclamations of outrage and disbelief gave way, at last, to half-hearted plans for what we would tell our captors when they came back and found us with the dead man, and the destruction, and the blood that seemed to be everywhere we looked in the cell. A lot of theories were tossed around, but nothing sounded very useful to me.

Finally, we decided to stick to the story Caine had suggested, although no one could agree on whether the person we had talked to was really Caine, or an impostor that had murdered Caine.... It got really complicated, so I tuned it out and started trying to make some

kind of plan of action for myself.

Now, I'm a very selfish person. I may have mentioned that before. I was hungry and thirsty and very uncomfortable. I began to look around the cell, wondering who had wound up with my key. I had passed it to my left, and it had made the rounds of the cell to the woman who was chained opposite to me.

She was slumped, knees drawn up almost to her chin, in an attitude of resignation. I realized that, in all the confusion, I had never once heard her speak. She never screamed. She never asked a question. Something nagged at the back of my mind. I tried to replay the scene in my head, but when I got to the part where the monster ripped off Caine's head, my mind went blank. I got the feeling I had missed something important...a point of light...a hint of music.... Whatever it was had to do with her.

I was determined to find out what it was, if only to while away the time. I stretched my mind towards hers, using the Pattern, sending it outward in a great spiral. Consciously, I widened the arc, trying to catch her train of thought. At the very edge of my awareness, I almost thought I heard something...and then it was gone.

"So I thought, since we're going to be here for a while, we might as well get acquainted." I groaned inwardly: my companion to the left had decided to strike up a conversation.

The Pattern flickered, then vanished in a crackle of energy that lanced through my temples like a knife.

I wish people wouldn't do that. It gives me a headache. I raised bleary eyes to look at him.

"I'm Damien, by the way. I know you're Bronwyn because that's what Caine called you. What do you think of all this?" he rattled on, cheerfully. "Boy, what a morning! I can tell you, this really gave me a turn!"

(I'll bet it did.)

"I can imagine what it did to you!"

(No, you can't.)

"I can't believe they put you girls through this!"

I guess he meant well. I tried to shut him out, but it was no use. All my senses seemed to be shorted out. That's what I get for trying to eavesdrop.

Rescue came, in the form of a guard who came down the stairs about an hour later, whistling and swinging a bucket of water. He stopped at the foot of the stairs, eyes bulging, slopping the water all over his boots.

True to form, we all began yelling.

He dropped the bucket and bolted back up the stairs, taking them two at a time. I didn't blame him.

Somebody met him at the landing, and we could hear them arguing for a while. More footsteps, and a second head appeared. We renewed our shouts for help.

From there, the situation took on all the aspects of a comic opera, as more people came down one at a time, to peer at us and argue about what to do. Apparently, this wasn't covered in the orders. I began to feel cheerful. I imagined the look on my father's face, when he saw this.

The man who entered the cell with four guards in tow was not my father, however. It was the relative who had earlier supervised our incarceration...the one they called Godfrey.

If he was shocked by what he saw, he controlled it well. He stepped through the carnage and made a brief examination of the Caine corpse, still strapped to the chair. Then he looked at us.

We took this as our cue, and did a nice job of groveling and begging for release. We insisted on our rights. We pointed out that the monsters might return and kill us all. We seriously doubted the Crown's ability to protect us. In short, we played it for all it was worth.

He's an arrogant creature. I wasn't sure he bought it.

"Get Julian!" he snapped to the guards, and they hopped to it.

He paced the cell, avoiding the pooled blood, and studied each of our faces in turn. We waited. He paused in front of Delian and frowned, just barely, as though he was trying not to mar his perfect face.

"What happened to you?"

"That was my father," Delian said flatly. "I tried to kick it away from him."

"Kick what away from him?" He seemed to be studying Delian's manacles, as though something was puzzling him. All of a sudden, I realized that Caine had chained Delian back up where he had fallen, and not where he had originally been. If this guy noticed....

So I started laying it on again about the monsters, and pretty soon everyone else joined in, and we kept him busy with it until Julian came pounding down the stairs with more guards. The dangerous moment had passed.

Eventually, they had to let us go. There were a lot more questions, many of them aimed at the man to my left, who turned out to be Julian's son. We stuck to our story, and finally it all worked out just the way Caine had said it would.

Some people came in and covered Caine's body, which seemed to be rather pointless, now. But they did it anyway. They were pretty easy on me. I guess they believed me when I told them I'd passed out and didn't remember a thing. It was close enough to the truth anyway. And when they got too nosy, I just got indignant and

demanded to see Bleys, which was actually the last thing in the world that I wanted. On the whole, it was very good theatre.

Julian had shown very little emotion throughout, which surprised me, because he and Caine were reputed to be very close. Then I remembered that someone had planted the false Caine in our cell, and I thought...why not Julian? He is certainly capable of all kinds of devious action. Aren't we all? Why not Julian, indeed?

Godfrey had disappeared for a while during the questioning, but returned later with the Trump artist in tow, the one they called Harlan. Julian produced a key (not mine) and began unlocking our manacles. We all crowded toward the stairway, but Godfrey and Harlan blocked our path to freedom.

"Hold on," Julian addressed us. "We've decided there's no point in keeping you here any longer, but I'm not convinced that you're telling us everything you know. Whatever it is that you're hiding, I'll find it out. Believe it!"

So they turned us loose with a verdict of 'not proven' instead of 'not guilty'. But nobody cared, and we pressed toward the stairs. As I passed Harlan, he pressed something into my hands that looked like a slim packet of cards. I shoved it into my pocket without looking at it, and hurried up the stairs. I had a lot to think about.

By the time I reached my rooms I had made and discarded a number of plans, the most attractive of which was to put as much physical distance between myself and Amber as I could, as quickly as possible. I had my hand on the call-bell to summon my maid to pack for me, when I realized that I had nowhere to go but home, and that just wasn't far enough.

I do not walk in Shadow. Not too many people know this, but my father does. The Pattern is etched in my mind in such a way that it has never been necessary for me to manipulate my environment to get where I want to go. I just walk the Pattern in my mind and visualize my destination...and that place becomes the 'where' I am.

It's easy, and much quicker than shifting Shadows, and for the longest time I couldn't understand why everybody used the other method. Bleys finally admitted to me that most of the others, himself included, just couldn't do what I did -- at least, not without great difficulty.

He always seems a bit uncomfortable discussing the extent of my abilities. Once he suggested that I go and talk to Dworkin about it, but I'm scared to death of Dworkin, so I never did.

The catch is that I've never been to very many places. I have a comfortable home and absorbing work to do. Outside of a few trips to Court or jewelry shopping expeditions, I almost never go anywhere that can't be reached by conventional methods. I have never shared

my father's lust to shape new worlds to his image. If I ever decide to play the power game, it will be for the whole ball of wax. If I want something badly enough, I'll just reach out and take it. Just then, I wanted an apple from the bowl I had seen in the library, so I reached out and took it.

There was a knock on my door.

"Come in." I bit into the apple.

The man at the door could have been my twin, except for the eyes, which were a startling shade of green. His hair was as red as my own, curly and worn rather long, and I noticed he had managed to effect a shower and a complete change of clothes since I had last seen him, chained to the opposite wall of the dungeon. He looked jaunty and none the worse for wear. I was conscious that I looked like something the cat had dragged in.

"Bronwyn."

I nodded, and he went on in a rush, before I could swallow and speak.

"Can you spare me a few moments? I think we need to talk. You see, we have something in common here: our folks seem to be behind that little round-up this morning. I don't know what's going on, but I don't like being used, and I'll bet you don't either. I'm Damarian, Fiona's son."

The apple stuck in my throat.

"That's not much of a recommendation," I told him, as soon as I finished choking.

"I know." He smiled apologetically. "I guess none of us can help being what we are."

"What's on your mind?"

He began pacing around my sitting room, touching things, picking them up and putting them down again, in a way I found particularly annoying. I waited, saying nothing.

Finally, he grabbed a chair and turned it around backwards, straddling it, arms on the backrest.

"Look," he said, "I've got a hunch that whatever is going on here is a lot bigger and more complicated than the folks are letting on. For one thing, I just can't see the Crown calling a state of emergency over a few Shadow creatures that happened to break through our borders, can you?"

I couldn't.

"Also, why the round-up? Some of us weren't anywhere near Amber. They went out of their way to pick us up. Can you think of any reason why your father would suspect you of treason?"

"Treason?"

Damarian was watching my face all this time, as if expecting

some reaction. But I wasn't prepared for his next question, phrased quietly, almost off-handed.

"Is there any reason he might think you're capable of mounting an attack on Amber?"

"Did Fiona send you here to ask me that?" I countered. I felt the red flush creeping up my face, remembering what I had been thinking about just before he knocked on my door.

"No!" He looked almost as angry as I was. "I'm here on my own, I swear it!"

He got up and began pacing again. I waited.

"That trick with the key in the dungeon...you did that...."

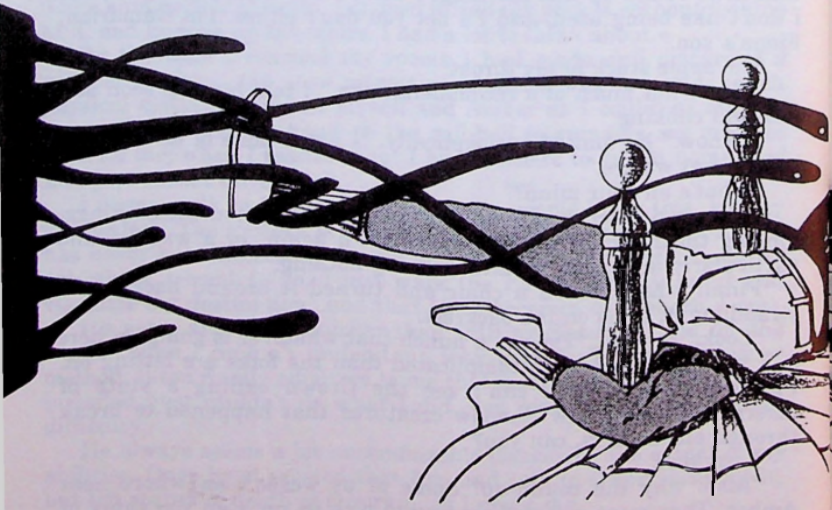
It wasn't a question, really, and I saw no point in denying it. I guess most of them saw me free myself and pass the key to Damien. I nodded.

"Do you mind telling me how?" He phrased the request politely.

I tried to explain about using the Pattern to create a tunnel into Shadow to search for what I want. But I could see from his expression that I had lost him.

"How did you know it was the right key?" he asked.

I shrugged. "It felt right...and of course, it had to be there."



Damarian shook his head. He was looking at me oddly.

"If you say so," he agreed. "Well, I guess I can see why they locked you up."

"You can't do that?" I asked. But I already knew the answer.

"Nooo...," he said. "But they say that Brand could...."

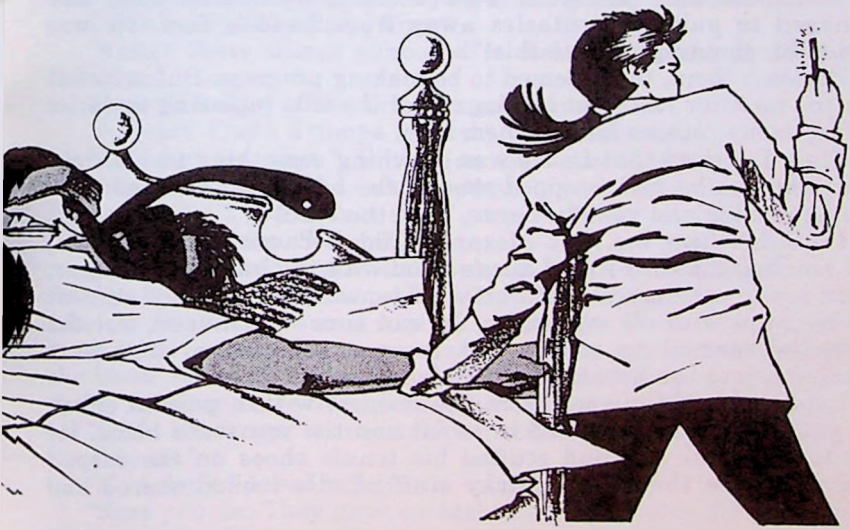
Now it was my turn to get up and pace around the room. I was beginning to wish I hadn't let him in.

"This is ridiculous! Think about what you're saying. How could *any* of us be considered to be a threat? With all their power...maybe you can't do what I do, but up against them...all ten of us together wouldn't stand a chance. Who locked us up, anyway? Some threat we are!"

"Who got the key?" he countered.

"Caine nipped that in the bud! You didn't catch me trying to take him on!"

I didn't like the way the conversation was going, and turned to tell him so. But he was staring off into space, a strange expression on his face. I've heard of Trump calls all my life, but this was the first time I had ever seen one. Instinctively, I touched him, to see what he was seeing.



I found myself staring into the face of another of my erstwhile companions, a tall, sandy-haired man they had called Alexander. He was badly agitated...worse than when we had been attacked in the dungeon.

"What is it?" That from Damarian.

"I need help! Something's got Lance, and I can't get it off of him!"

"Bring us through."

Something, indeed, had Lance. He was struggling with a black, tentacled creature that covered his face and most of his upper body. It seemed to be trying to drag him through a hole or warp, much like the one we had just stepped through. But Lance had one arm and one leg wrapped around the bedpost to his right, and was hanging on for dear life. The bed and his muscles both creaked with the effort. I didn't see how he could breathe, much less fight.

Alexander and Damarian attacked the thing with their daggers. I looked around for some way to be of use, but I'm not much of a fighter and couldn't think of anything to do.

I decided to try to close the hole. Maybe I could, at least, prevent Lance from being dragged into it. I tried shaping the Pattern's fire into a device like a torch, hoping to sear the rift and close it. It didn't work.

Alexander and Damarian were winning by inches. They had managed to pull the tentacles away from Lance's face. He was wild-eyed, shouting, "I hate this!"

Between them, they seemed to be making progress. But it looked like the monster just kept boiling out of the rift, replacing tentacles as fast as my cousins hacked them off.

Then I noticed that Lance was clutching something in his right hand, the one he had wrapped around the bedpost. I realized what was happening and yelled, "Lance, drop the card!"

He didn't hear me. But Alexander did, because he reached out and knocked the card from Lance's hand with the butt of his dagger. I was ready with my bolt of Pattern fire, which I slammed against the creature with all my might. I'm not sure if it helped, but the tentacles seemed to collapse back upon themselves and were swallowed into the hole that suddenly...wasn't.

Lance uncoiled himself from the bedpost with a painful effort, his gaudy sport shirt soaked in sweat and the monster's blood. He sat down on the bed and scuffed his tennis shoes on the carpet, trying to wipe the brown, sticky stuff off. He looked scared and dejected.

"Thanks," he said, after a few breaths. Then, "Why me? Just look at this room."

I giggled. I couldn't help it. Somehow, it seemed impossible to

take him seriously, sitting there covered in slop and looking aggrieved.

Alexander found a bottle of wine somewhere, and sloshed some into a goblet for Lance. Then he took a long pull from the bottle and passed it to Damarian, who drank and passed it to me. Nobody spoke till the bottle was empty.

I bent over and picked up the card that Lance had dropped. It was a Trump, of course, done in the old style, like the ones my father carries. This one was of Corwin. Noting the resemblance to Lance, and making the obvious connection, I asked him, "Were you trying to call Corwin?"

"Damn right! I knew Dad would get me out of here, and figure out a way to make them leave me alone. I almost had him, too. He was riding through the woods somewhere on his favorite horse, but he didn't seem to be able to hear me."

We waited, figuring there was more to the tale than that. After a little while he went on.

"He was riding right toward me. Then the horse began to change into something else, and reached out and grabbed me and tried to pull me in.... Well, you know the rest."

"What happened to Corwin?" Damarian asked him.

"I don't know. After the horse-thing grabbed me, I couldn't see Dad anymore. I was too busy trying to hang onto the bed."

I handed the Trump to him.

"Aren't these things supposed to feel cold?" I asked. "This one feels hot."

They all looked at the Trump, and then at me.

"At least, Dad's Trumps feel cold," I told them.

"Let me see that." Damarian took the Trump from Lance. "Hmmm...you're right about that, it does feel warm. Uh, Bronwyn...don't you have a set of your own?"

"No," I told him. "Do you?"

I was surprised and a little put out to learn that they all had a few Trumps, given to them by their respective parents. Apparently, most of them had some way of getting in touch with the older generation in case of emergency. I, of course, had none. I thought of the bleak hours I had spent waiting for Dad while my mother was dying. Another score to be settled, someday....

"Well, cheer up," Lance told me. "You've got a set now, even if it's only us."

"No I don't." I was mystified.

"Sure you do. They gave us each a set when they let us go, don't you remember?"

I remembered then. I pulled the cards Harlan had given me from my pocket and examined them. There were ten...one for each

of the people who had been locked in the dungeon with me, excepting Caine.

I was relieved to see I hadn't been immortalized in manacles. It was a good likeness, actually. I was standing in a field, throwing one of my hunting owls from my wrist...complete, even to the detailed tooling on my gauntlet. I had done the leather work myself, and I knew it was exact. Someone had been watching me for quite awhile. The thought was disquieting.

While I was examining the Trumps, the others had continued their earlier conversation. When I tuned in again, Lance was talking about how much he wanted to talk to his father about what was going on in Amber. This seemed sensible to me. From everything I've always heard, Corwin is the right guy to have around in an emergency. Moreover, it seemed encouraging that Lance felt comfortable enough to want to talk to his parent. I can't imagine asking Dad for advice or help.

Alex was saying, "It sure seemed like a good idea when we thought of it, anyway. Look, I want to thank you for coming like that. I just grabbed the deck and you were on top, Damarian, so I yelled for help."

They seemed to have forgotten I was there, which was O.K., because I always learn a lot of useful stuff when I can fade into the woodwork.

"I still want to talk to Dad," Lance insisted. "Now more than ever, because I know he would have answered if he could. I have the feeling he may be in some kind of trouble. I'm going to give it another try."

"What, are you nuts?" Alex was disgusted.

"Wait a minute." Damarian held up his hand. "It may not be such a bad idea, if you take the proper precautions. Let's give it some thought...."

He looked at me. "Any ideas, Bronwyn?"

I thought about it for a moment. I wasn't sure I wanted to get involved with another of those black, tentacled creatures, but I was curious about the Trumps. Before I could come up with any suggestions, however, we were interrupted by a knock on Lance's door.

This threw us into some confusion, because we had just about forgotten that we were sitting in a bedroom that had been turned into a battlefield.

"Who is it?" Lance called out.

"It's Godfrey and Harlan. May we come in?"

The enemy!

"Uh...give me a minute, will you?" Lance called out. "I just got out of the shower."

We scattered, trying to tidy things up. Alex and Damarian picked up stuff that had been knocked over in the scuffle. What to do with the tentacles? Using the Pattern to open a portal into Shadow, I shoved the mess in. It probably wound up in someone's closet: I don't care. Alex's jaw dropped, and Damarian gave me a weird look as if to say, "See?" Lance scurried out of the bath, wearing a robe, and we all flung ourselves into chairs and tried to look casual.

Lance took a deep breath and called, in melodious tones that I thought were a bit overdone, "You can come in now...."

They seemed surprised to see us all together. Lance ushered them in and invited them to sit down, but since Damarian and I already occupied the only two chairs in the room, they merely looked about for a few heartbeats, confused, and declined the invitation.

"I don't want to take up your time," Godfrey told Lance. "Bleys has asked me to extend his greetings, and an invitation to the family dinner tonight."

Have you ever met Godfrey? He's supposed to be some sort of priest, somewhere out in Shadow, and he always looks just like he's on his way to have his portrait painted. He is very tall and blond. If he wasn't such a snob he would be unbearably handsome, because his face is full of sunlight.

Harlan is his shadow. I mean, he's slight and brown by comparison. He always seems to stand a little behind Godfrey, and he doesn't say very much.

They didn't fit here, in this room, and they knew it.

"That's...very nice of him," Lance muttered.

Harlan spoke; I jumped. "It's customary."

"Whoever is in residence in Amber always joins the family meal in the evening," Godfrey explained. "Actually, I think Bleys has something he wants to talk to you about."

"Bleys wants to discuss something with me?" Lance didn't look thrilled. "What does he want with me?"

"Excuse me, the invitation is extended to all of you. We had thought to call on each of you in turn, but since you're all together, this should save some time. Apparently, Bleys has an announcement to make."

I was puzzled. I glanced at Damarian, but his face told me nothing. Why was Dad issuing invitations in Random's palace?

"Well...sure," said Lance.

We all nodded in turn -- me, a bit reluctantly. I know all about the family dinner ritual, but usually manage to be out of the palace at dinner time. I've been to them once or twice, but nobody talks to me anyway.

"Fine." Godfrey seemed satisfied. "Then, eight o'clock, in the small dining room." Then he added, "It's formal, of course."

I felt that was unnecessary.

I thought they would leave then, but no luck. Godfrey gazed around the room. He always notices more than you want him to.

"So, you're all getting acquainted, then. Good."

"We were just talking about...uh...taking a walk," Lance supplied.

"Oh, then you already know each other. I wasn't aware of that," he commented.

"We don't!" Alex looked up from his magazine, a dangerous edge to his voice. "Or, at least, we didn't...until you threw the little mixer for us...."

He let it hang, and so did Godfrey. I thought they just might be a match for each other, these two.

Harlan cleared his throat. Oh Lords, I thought, he's going to speak again. "Just for the record, that wasn't our idea."

"Yeah," said Damarian. "I'll bet you were just following orders."

You don't back Godfrey down with mere hostility. He has thick skin.

"Something like that. Why don't you try it sometime? Save yourself a lot of trouble."

He turned to go, then turned back again. "By the way, have any of you seen Kelcey?"

"Who's Kelcey?"

"She was with you this morning...uh...downstairs. I thought she might have mentioned where she was going."

We shook our heads.

"We went to invite her to dinner, but she wasn't in her rooms." He shrugged. "Oh well, if you see her, tell her about it, will you?"

We told him we would do it, and finally they left.

When the door closed behind them Damarian said, "It's formal, of course," in such a perfect imitation of Godfrey's voice that we all burst out laughing.

If we laughed a little more than the joke was worth...well, it was necessary, I guess. I can't speak for the others, but I was beginning to feel caught up in something I wasn't sure I could handle.

"Are you going to dinner?" Damarian asked me.

I shrugged. "I suppose so. I'm curious. Why didn't Random invite us himself?"

"Maybe he's too busy." Alexander had actually found an article in his magazine that interested him.

So we all agreed to go. As Lance would say: "A free meal is a free meal is a free meal...."

"So what are we going to do about Dad? I still feel that I ought to give his Trump another try."

Lance had found himself fresh clothes, and had gone into the bathroom to change. He called out to us from there.

We were still all sitting in his room, just 'hanging out,' which is something I'd always wanted to do. I realized that, in spite of everything, I was having a good time. I found myself liking these cousins of mine, which scared me. It went against everything I've ever been taught.

Alexander took Corwin's Trump in his hands and studied it intently.

"I dunno, Lance," he said. "I think you're asking for trouble."

"Does it still feel warm?" Damarian asked him.

"No, not now. It feels normal to me. If you want to try it again, Lance, I'm right behind you, but...I don't know...." He shook his head doubtfully.

"Not here," I protested.

"Bronwyn, do you have some sort of a plan?" Damarian was watching me closely. I still was not sure I trusted Fiona's son.

Lance came out of the bathroom. "What's up?"

"Let's go down to the Pattern room," I suggested. "I'll explain on the way."

When we had reached the final set of stairs between the dungeon level and the true nether regions of our family home, Alexander took one of the lanterns from a bracket on the wall and lit it, while I outlined my plan.

"If you want to call Corwin, the safest place to do it is from the center of the Pattern. If everything goes well, you and Corwin can go anywhere you want from there, or talk about whatever you want in complete privacy. But, if something else comes through, one of us will be standing out here with this." I pulled Lance's Trump from my pocket. "We'll bring you through, and leave the thing in the middle until we figure out how to deal with it. If it moves out of the center it's fried."

Alex cocked his head to one side, looking at me. "You know, Bronwyn, that just might work...."

At the foot of the stairs, the guards on duty greeted me in a friendly manner. I know most of them, because I spend a lot of time in the Pattern room, when I am in Amber. He helped Alex open the huge door, and waved us into the corridor beyond.

The Pattern flickers and glows with a sullen green fire, and hums with a sub-audible vibration that I find exciting and beautiful. Others do not always feel this way. I could tell by Lance's face that he was not looking forward to this. Not that he was afraid, mind you. Some people actually experience a degree of physical discomfort on the Pattern. I do not, but that's me.

But he was determined. So we all took our places, and Lance stepped out on the Pattern and took a walk. It does take time. When he reached the center, he took out Corwin's Trump and we waited. Minutes ticked by.

After a while it became obvious that he wasn't having any luck. When it looked like he had paused for a rest, I took out his Trump and concentrated. It was much easier than I had expected.

"What's wrong?"

"I can't get through. There's too much resistance. Feels like a brick wall."

Stalemate. We dithered about what to do.

"Maybe, if one of you tried with me...."

"Sure, Lance, if you think it would help."

Alexander and Damarian looked doubtful, so I prepared to step out onto the Pattern myself.

"Wait!" Lance's voice came from the faraway center; I had broken the contact. He fumbled with the Trumps for a few seconds. I felt a strange sensation, guessed the source, and opened my mind to it. Lance held out his hand to me. I took it, and found myself standing in the center of the Pattern.

We just looked at each other for a few moments. I took a deep breath, and nodded.

"Well, here goes nothing," Lance murmured, and we began to concentrate on Corwin's Trump.

I felt the resistance almost immediately. It felt like someone had slammed a gate in my face, not at all like my earlier experience calling Lance. We cut it off after a moment, and looked at each other.

"Whew...." Lance shook his head.

"Yup," I said, "I feel what you mean. Let's try it again...."

Before we could do this thing, I heard a muffled sound from the direction of the Pattern's beginning, where I had left Damarian and Alexander. I spared them a glance. It seemed I was not as tight with the Pattern's guards as I'd thought. Godfrey and Harlan had entered the Pattern room, not quite running. Somebody had ratted us out.

There was a sharp expulsion of breath beside me. Lance had noticed them too. I looked at him.

"It's now or never," he muttered, almost to himself.

I looked at the Trump again. Corwin in black and silver...looking strong... looking competent. I wanted to reach him with all of my being. I pulled, then, from the nexus of power that surrounded me, channeling, funneling it inside me and then flinging it outward, onto the face of the Trump.

I felt, rather than saw, Lance beside me, attempting to add his strength to mine. His control and essence felt different from mine,

and I struggled to mesh the two. It is always like that for me, in the beginning, when I try to merge my psychic energy with another person's. I just have to match resonances, but it takes a moment.

Then, suddenly, it clicked into being. Together, we poured all that we were into the contact. The card seemed to dissolve in my vision. My mind centered briefly on the silver rose in the black background of Corwin's cloak. Then there was only the blackness.

I felt myself taking an involuntary step forward into the dark, but caught myself abruptly, remembering where I was. The concentration wavered. I felt Lance stumble against my outstretched arm, as though he, too, were being drawn against his will. Then I steadied again, waiting for the blackness to coalesce into...something.

There was a disturbance, a hint that someone was there in the darkness. Vainly I tried to identify the source. Was it Corwin? I just couldn't tell. I extended....

Then, suddenly he was there, a spot in the darkness that flared briefly into the form of a man. He was burning, face contorted into a rictus of pain. Through the contact I could sense a terrible heat.

He disappeared in a flash of fire, replaced by a long, twisting, black thing that reached straight for my throat. Lance's wrist-numbing blow struck the card from my hand, and it fell to the floor, smoking...too late!

Seen in its entirety in the small epicenter of the Pattern, the creature seemed incredibly huge. We scrambled backward, jockeying for position, trying to maintain the distance between it and ourselves.

'Stay in the center!' my mind screamed at me. 'It's death to step out!'

"Lance, get out of here!" I gasped, ducking out of reach. "There's no room!"

"You come too." He hadn't forgotten our plan.

"GO! JUST GO!" I screamed. "NOW!"

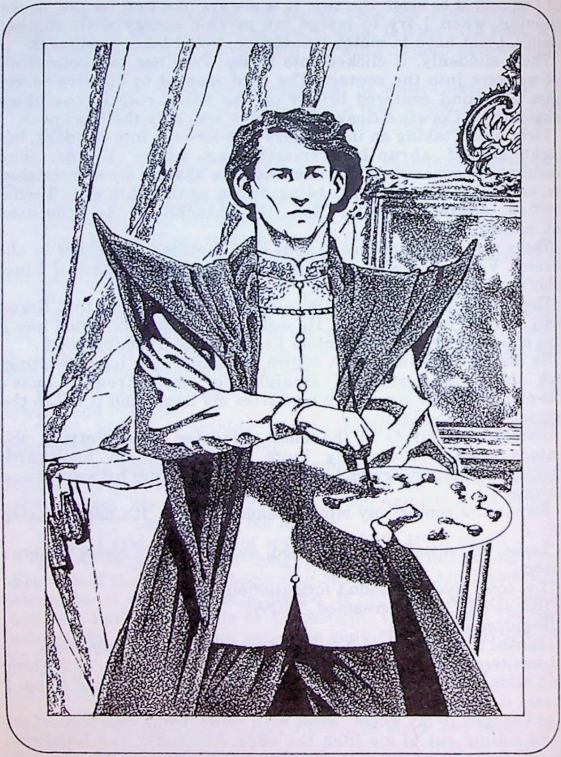
He gulped and did it.

I feinted to the left, but it followed me with its uncanny reach.

I was terrified. But most of all, I think I was angry. That thing didn't belong here. This was MY place. I knew what I had to do. I just sent it away. I put it in Aunt Fiona's bedroom.

As I sagged to my knees, weak with relief, I was conscious of my cousins calling out to me from the edge. Alexander and Damarian were gesturing to a point almost midway to the threshold of the First Veil.

On quite another level, I was aware of a change in the resonance of the Pattern around me. The subtle whine of power that doesn't quite reach the ears had altered, somehow, and the difference was



Harlan: "I raised two fingers to my sweaty forehead in a salute. He deserved it. I do respect power. It is the only thing I respect."

painful.

I couldn't stand. My legs refused to support me. Across the Pattern, and spreading like an ink spot on parchment, there was a stain. Slowly but steadily it grew, blotting out the lines of fire that gave form to my existence. It crept toward the center where I crouched. I have been raised on tales of the black road. The look of this was eerily familiar.

(What am I going to do now?)

I looked at my cousins. Alex and Damarian were still trying to get my attention. Lance and Harlan seemed to be arguing about something. Then Harlan drew out a deck of Trumps. I remember thinking, contemptuously, that he thought they were the answer to everything. Godfrey was gone.

The attempt to contact Corwin had cost me more than I cared to admit. I realized this, with a sharp pang of physical pain, as I tried to marshal enough psychic energy to try to contain the growing darkness. I drove my mind against the edge of the black stain. For a moment, it seemed to waver. Then, maddeningly, it seeped around the fringe of my control and continued to spread towards the middle.

Panic pounded at the door of my consciousness. I thrust it away and tried again. This time I really leaned on the stain. I gained an inch...maybe two. Good. Then it slipped away from my point of concentration and billowed toward me from the sides.

I never felt the contact: this guy was good. All of a sudden, from out of nowhere, someone was pumping raw power to me.

Supernova!

Lords, it was glorious! Nearly a physical sensation, the tingling exhilaration of incredible power poured into my mind. To have such a power...to use such a power...I would do anything! It was like...I...can't tell you what it was like.

In less than a heartbeat, I had it in sync. We slammed it against the stain with a tremendous force, and felt the stain give slightly as we contained it.

I thought we were gaining, and I wanted to do this so badly. It just wasn't enough. Even with all that power, it just wasn't enough! The stain had stopped growing, but it did not recede.

I don't know how long we held it there. I was torn between the dizzying joy of wielding more power than I had ever dreamed possible, and the bitter disappointment of failing to use it effectively.

I heard the door to the Pattern chamber open with a bang, but didn't dare look up to see who had entered. Then suddenly, another mind meshed with mine and that of the mystery donor. This one hit me like a fist between the eyes, but it was strong and steady and gave us the edge we needed. It also seemed familiar to me, somehow.

After that, it almost seemed easy. The stain imploded, so

abruptly that I staggered with the shock. The Pattern was clear.

I shook my head to clear it. The touch of the other minds was gone. I sat down in the center of the Pattern, shaking with a reactive chill.

I looked toward the door and saw my father, grinning at me. He stood by the edge of the Pattern, arms folded across his chest, smug and satisfied. Naturally, that made me furious.

Godfrey stood with his back to the door, a little behind Dad, in an unconscious copy of my father's pose. I hated him then, irrationally perhaps, because he had helped...but I hated him just the same.

The others were grouped around Harlan, who was just looking up from the Trump that he held in his hand. I realized that it must be mine. So that was my unknown benefactor. Will wonders never cease?

I raised two fingers to my sweaty forehead in a salute. He deserved it. I do respect power. It is the only thing I respect.

I think he may have smiled a little.

Dad said, "You can come out now, Bronwyn, it's all over. I took care of it. What were you doing in there, anyway?"

I felt diminished. Dad can make me feel like a delinquent ten-year-old without half trying. I wanted to ask him what the stain had been, but I figured he'd have too much fun explaining it all to me.

I just shook my head and called out to him, "I'm going to my room, Dad. I have a headache."

And that was where I went.

As badly as I wanted a nap before dinner, sleep eluded me. For one thing, the headache I had claimed to avoid my father was very real. I am subject to them, if I start throwing psychic energy around like there's no tomorrow.

Worse, though, was the grim realization that I could have been killed on at least four occasions that day. Since this was probably more brushes with death than I had experienced in my entire life to date, I found the thought... unnerving....

Once again, I toyed with the idea of just going home and leaving Amber to take care of itself.

On the other hand, the events of the day had tickled my curiosity and opened up a few possibilities to me that I hadn't been aware of, before now. Most of it had to do with power: psychic, physical and political. Looking back, I can see I was hooked, even then. I just didn't know it yet.

After about an hour of tossing and turning, I got up and made some willow-bark tea to dull the pounding in my head. When I felt better, I began looking around for something to wear to dinner. I

found a dress in my closet that would do, since I didn't feel well enough to go looking through Shadow for something that would be really impressive. I hoped to escape Dad's notice, so I dressed it down. I only wore my emeralds, and my rings, and, of course, my bracelets, since one of them is kind of tricky...it's ensorcelled and raises my strength from wimp status to something that almost approaches normal. I never go anywhere without it.

I planned to get to the small dining room at eight sharp, take my place, eat my meal and leave. I certainly wasn't looking forward to any more confrontations, but I was curious about what Dad had to say. I figured if I could get Random's attention, I might be able to ask him, privately, what he thought about this whole mess and what, if anything, he wanted me to do. I was hoping he would say that I should just go home and forget about it.

The small dining room seats about forty people in comfort. You should see the grand dining room if you really want to be impressed. I was right on time, but there seemed to be some sort of delay. Someone mentioned that Aunt Fiona had apparently run into some problem when she went upstairs to change for dinner. I found that amusing.

People were standing around in small groups, and the buzz of polite chatter rose up from some quarters. Uncle Julian was there, with Damien in tow, very much the dutiful son. He did not approach me, which was a relief. Maybe I have mentioned he seems to run off at the mouth. I wasn't in the mood.

Damarian, however, noticed me immediately. I accepted the wine he brought me, and was relieved that he seemed willing to keep the conversation general. Finally, Bleys came in with Fiona on his arm. She, of course, looked beautiful...and, I thought, a little miffed about something. But she made no mention of what it was, or why they were late.

I thought we would wait for Random, but this was not to be. Dad headed straight for the place at the head of the table, and seated Fiona, ceremoniously, to his right. There was no sign of Vialle, Random's beautiful, sightless Queen, either.

I thought this was odd. The King logically takes the place at the head of the table. What game was Dad playing? Even if Random had decided not to join us, his place should, traditionally, have been left empty, not occupied by my father.

Dad nodded to the servants to begin the meal, and except for the usual, polite dinner-time murmur, no one said anything special for at least thirty minutes, while we attacked our food. This was not surprising.

I did miss Random's particular brand of dinner-time entertainment. He tends toward comedians or lively jazz musicians.

We had only the services of the Court bard, this night, and apparently he had instructions to keep things low keyed, because he sang a selection of moody ballads that depressed me.

Finally, as we toyed with a selection of desserts (except for Lance, who had two) Dad rose and tapped on his wine glass to get our attention. We all stopped eating and looked at him (except for Lance, who was putting more cream on his pie and went right on doing so).

I propped my elbow on the table, chin in hand, and studied my father's face. He was trying hard to look grave and concerned. But I know him. He was in his glory!

"I have grave news for you all. I'm sure you are all wondering why the King is not present here tonight. We had hoped to keep this a private matter, but in light of the present emergency, we have decided to make a full disclosure, and once again ask you to reaffirm your fealty to the Crown of Amber."

(Get to the point, Dad. He loves to hear himself talk.)

"Random is missing." He went on, ignoring the small buzz of consternation his news effected. "He and Benedict and Martin, and, we think, Gérard, although we are not sure, recently received information that our sister, Deirdre, is alive. They went off to find her."

Across the table, I saw Alexander start, violently, at the sound of Deirdre's name. So that's where he fits in, I thought. There was little or no resemblance, from the pictures I had seen.

"I was not privy to the information that Random had, but he must have felt there was a strong possibility that it was accurate, acting as he did. Frankly, I doubt if this is possible. I mean," he gestured to Fiona and Julian, "we all saw her die."

"Since Random left Amber, the attacks on our territories have increased enormously, coupled with the attack and murder of our brother, Caine, this morning, of which you are all aware."

My cousins all seemed to have suddenly found something interesting on their plates. None of us really wanted to talk about that one.

Someone -- Argentis, I think -- said quickly, "I suppose you have tried contacting them by Trump."

Dad seemed annoyed at the interruption. "Of course we did. They cannot or will not answer. Also, we have noticed that their Trumps become extremely hot when we try to use them, which does not bode well for my brother's safety."

I considered that. In view of the afternoon I had spent, I couldn't help but agree with Dad for once in my life.

He went on, "In view of the situation, emergency action seems indicated. In Random's absence, I have no choice but to assume the Crown, pro tem, and take whatever action seems necessary to protect Amber, and, with luck, restore Random to the throne. If we

can find him," he added, "and if he's still alive."

No choice. Well, maybe, I thought, and wondered how hard he was going to try to find Random and restore him to the throne. I could buy all the stuff about protecting Amber, but Dad is an opportunist. I know he'd never have the guts to try a coup if Random was safely ensconced on the throne. But if the Crown was up for grabs...well, I wouldn't be shocked to see him make the most of things. That would be bad. The King is supposed to be a father to his people, right? That's not Dad's strong suit.

Dad had paused for a moment, to let the blow sink in. And it was a blow. Everyone was talking in low tones, except for Damarian, who shot me an ironic smile. I wondered how much of this he had known from Fiona.

I glanced her way. She was just sitting there, smiling into her wine glass, ignoring the rest of us. She plays a very deep game. It has always been her intention to see one of her brothers -- full brothers, I mean -- sitting on the throne of Amber. They had failed miserably with Brand, but now things were falling into place for them. If they played their cards right (strange how we think of everything in terms of cards) they could come out of this smelling like a rose, with the Crown in their hot little hands. No...they wouldn't break their necks, trying to find Random.

I looked at the others. Expressions of shock and dismay were plain on their faces. Some of the brawnier types were getting a bit loud. Plans were being made. Dad just rode it out, letting them get angrier. Apparently, this was the reaction he had hoped for. I just sat there, taking it all in. Nobody noticed me, and I was glad. I can't help feeling a bit embarrassed when Dad gets on his high horse. I hoped no one would think I had anything to do with it.

Finally, he indicated that he wanted everyone's attention again, so the buzz subsided. They all seemed willing to listen to what he had to say now, which surprised me. Nobody was bucking him. Like good little soldiers, they seemed willing to accept him as Commander in Chief.

"So I've asked you all here tonight to reaffirm your loyalty to Amber. In our present crisis, we need each and every one of you. Amber must be protected at all costs. This must be our first priority. I am asking you all to put your personal differences aside and cooperate with us in this. Will you do it?"

Dad can be a real rabble rouser when he's going strong. They jumped to their feet as one. I got up too. Although I had personal reservations, I am not one to swim upstream, and I could see which way this thing was going. We all swore to uphold the Crown and guarantee the safety of Amber to the best of our abilities, and for what it was worth, I meant it, I guess. But I noticed that no mention

was made of going out to look for Random.

That just about did it for dinner. They broke off into small groups again. One group, headed by one of the muscle men -- who I learned was Benedict's son -- went up to Dad and made a pretty speech, pledging his sword, and probably his soul, to whatever Dad was planning. I might have warned him, but it didn't seem worth the trouble. Let them find out what Dad was like on their own.

I made a beeline for the door, but Damarian caught up with me in the hall and sort of muscled me into the little study where some of the others had gathered to talk. Godfrey was there. I looked around for Harlan, but he seemed to have escaped. Someone was passing out drinks. Damarian grabbed two from the tray, and hustled me into an alcove.

"Well, this puts you into a nice position, Bronwyn," he began, smiling as always.

"What do you mean?" I asked him.

"If Random can't be found, and Bleys assumes the Crown and holds it, well... you're his only child. That makes you the heir."

I choked on the wine. My headache came back in full force...nice position, indeed! If the others were thinking what he was thinking, I could have a dozen daggers in my back by morning. I decided this was a good opportunity to make my position clear.

"I think Dad is assuming a little too much!" I demurred. "Random is missing. Missing, not dead...at least as far as anybody knows. Bleys' actions are premature, and so are the conclusions you're jumping to. After all, that's not the way the succession runs. There are no laws of primogeniture in Amber. Random isn't Oberon's eldest son. The Unicorn chose him. That's what made him King! As far as I'm concerned, he still is, until somebody proves otherwise!"

Do you know what it's like when you're really worked up about something, and you find yourself talking a little louder than you had intended? Suddenly the room was very quiet, and everybody seemed to be looking at me. I was very uncomfortable.

I saw Alex across the room, with Temar and Argentis. He nodded and smiled at me, approvingly, I thought. Well, at least they all knew where I stood. Godfrey, too, nodded to himself, as though he had made up his mind about something.

Damarian shrugged.

"Well, if that's the way you feel about it, what are you going to do? Go off into Shadow and look for the King yourself?"

Perish the thought.

"I don't know," I said. "I haven't decided yet if there's anything I *can* do, except keep out of my father's way."

"Would it be so bad...," he asked me softly, "to be the heir...?"

"If you think it would be such a great idea," I told him, "then *you* be the heir. I'm sure Fiona would be pleased. Dad always does what she wants anyway."

I wondered if maybe this hadn't been the plan all along. He had made every effort to seek me out. For what? In my mind's eye, I pictured them all scheming together -- Bleys, Fiona and Damarian -- with Damarian assigned to keep me out of the way until things were settled. I had no illusions that Dad would do anything in my best interests. I knew he would use me if he could, but he has never been known for paternal affection.

Damarian was smiling at me. Apparently he sensed that there was something running through my mind.

"I just think we redheads ought to stick together," he said enigmatically, and I had to be content with that explanation.

He was smiling. He was always smiling.

I reaffirmed my decision to watch him, carefully. I feared him more than the others combined. Maybe even more than Dad.

The evening seemed to stretch endlessly. Many of the others had left, to their beds, I guessed, or, more realistically perhaps, to hatch plots and plans of their own.

I had consumed more wine than is my habit, and most of it had gone straight to my head. It seemed impossible to think clearly. I just sat there, miserably, trying to think about what I was going to do.

The party in the study had dwindled to four, just Alex, Godfrey, Damarian and myself. As if by some signal, we all moved to the grouping of sofas and chairs around the fireplace. Alexander rebuilt the fire, and Godfrey refilled the glasses, except for mine, which I had covered with my hand. I had the feeling I was going to need a clear head. It was late, but I knew that sleep was out of the question, at least for me. There was just too much going on.

The door to the study opened and Damien came in. He flopped down on the sofa by Alexander.

"Anything left in that wine bottle?"

"Help yourself," Godfrey told him.

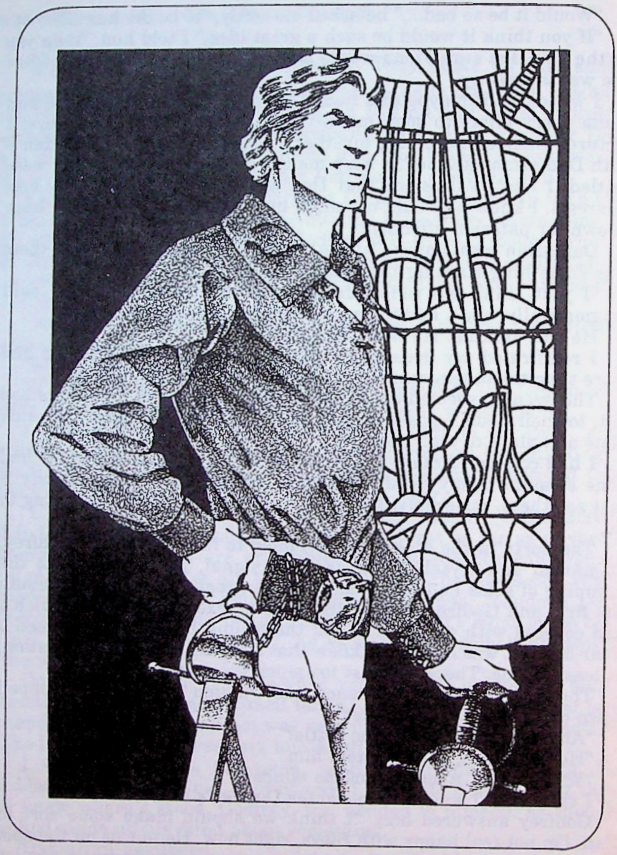
"What is this, a meeting of the minds?"

I shrugged. I was in no mood for Damien's chatter.

Godfrey answered him. "I think we should make some sort of plan. I'm not real happy with Bleys, right now. He put us on the spot this morning, and he just isn't giving us enough information to let us know where we stand."

I wondered if Dad hadn't planted him to spy on us, but Damarian seemed willing to discuss it. Well, I figured, that fits.

"What do you have in mind?"



Godfrey: "He is very tall and blond. If he wasn't such a snob he would be unbearably handsome, because his face is full of sunlight.."

Godfrey took a sip of wine and studied us over the rim of the goblet, as if trying to make up his mind about what to say. His bishop's ring glittered in the firelight. I saw he was not dressed in the full regalia he had affected earlier. He wore a simple black tunic and pants, with a sword belted at his hip. He looked tough and businesslike, not at all the pompous preacher of our earlier encounters. Just trying to look like us folks, I thought.

"Action," was all he said.

"Such as?" Damarian wanted to know the details, of course.

"We just can't sit here and wait for Bleys to handle it, or for Random to come back and clear things up. We took an oath tonight, and I, for one, mean to honor it, although maybe not just the way Bleys expects me to. There's a lot at stake here."

"You're right!" Damien agreed. "I've been thinking about it ever since dinner, and I've come to the conclusion that it's time to take a hand. We've been sitting around, all this time, letting things happen to us...like this morning...." He shot a glance at Godfrey, who met his gaze calmly and unapologetically. "Anyway, I'm tired of being pushed around by my father, and everybody else who thinks he's got a right to tell me what I should do."

"Then, of course, *you* have some sort of plan?" Godfrey asked him, apparently unwilling to argue Damien's earlier point.

"As a matter of fact, I do," Damien told him. "I'm going out to Tir-na Nog'th as soon as the moon rises. The past and the future are there for the taking. Maybe I can find out the truth about what's *really* happened so far, and some hint, at least, of the future. Enough to figure out who's holding the winning hand here."

Cards again! Would we never be free of them?

We chewed on this for a bit. Godfrey had called for action, and at least this was something. I started thinking about it, and about cards...maybe there was something I could do, after all.

"That's a good idea," Damarian approved. "Finding out the truth about Random's disappearance might shed some light on the situation. At least, it might give us a hint to Bleys and mother's motives. I can't help wondering if they might not have had a hand in this."

"Godfrey, you were here. Did they tell the truth about Random's disappearance?" I asked him.

He shook his head. "I *wasn't* here," he stated. "Bleys contacted me by Trump, and told me he had an important mission for me, in the service of the Crown. That's how he put it. I hooked up with Harlan when he told me what he wanted to do. Just in case some of you turned out to be a problem." He grinned, suddenly, and the sun came out. "Which you did. But I didn't know Random was missing until this morning. All the time, I thought he had just delegated

something to Bleys. He does that from time to time, just to make them feel necessary, or keep them out of trouble, or something."

"You heard it from Bleys, then?" Damarian asked. "Then I guess you got the same story we did."

"No, actually, Julian told me. But yes, it was the same story we got at dinner."

"How could they keep a thing like this quiet?"

Something about this scenario was bothering me, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

"Someone must have seen or heard something to shed some light on this," I said. "There's a whole palace full of people here. You can't tell me that the King, the heir, and two of their best generals just walked out of the palace one day, and nobody asked where they were going. Did they leave Dad in charge? That strikes me as odd. Julian would have been the logical choice, he's always loyal to whoever is in power...Oberon, Eric, Corwin...take your pick. *But*, if Random didn't leave anybody in charge, that's odder still. You just don't do that, with a kingdom...."

"Yes," Damien agreed, a bit too readily. "Someone, like *your* father, could just step in and grab everything."

I refused to be offended. After all, it was only the truth. Perhaps he was annoyed because I had indicated that his own parent lacked ambition. To each his own.

Alex stirred on the sofa. All this time, he had been quiet. Thinking, I supposed. "Doesn't anybody think it's odd that no one told *me* there was a possibility that Mom was alive?"

Now that did seem strange. Surely Deirdre's son would traditionally have had a stake in this. They could have, at least, asked him to go along.

"Maybe they didn't want to raise any false hopes," Damarian suggested glibly.

Alexander stretched long, booted legs out toward the fire. He shook his head. I felt sorry for him.

"I came to terms, a long time ago, with the fact that my mother was dead," he said. "I'm not sure I would have believed she was alive, anyway, without some pretty convincing evidence. But then, neither would Random, he's no fool. And as Bleys said, they all saw her die."

I thought about that. Did anyone really see her die? What Dad told me, once when he was waxing lyrical about his adventures (what did you do in the war, Daddy?) what they had actually seen was that Brand dragged her over the edge with him, when Caine shot him with the crossbow. It was taken for granted that they perished in the Abyss, but he admitted that no one really knew what happened to them then. I know that, because I asked, with all the

morbid curiosity of the very young. No one ever found their bodies. To my knowledge, no one ever looked. Now, Dad seemed sure that she was dead. Convenient.

"I wonder, has anyone talked to Vialle about this?" Alex seemed to be thinking out loud. "Random must have told her something about what he was planning. She never takes an active role, but I understand Random discusses everything with her, just to get her opinion."

Vialle is reputed to be very wise and compassionate. I thought my cousin might be on the right track. Surely, Random would have told her about whatever evidence he had for believing Deirdre was alive. Providing there had been such evidence to begin with, and that it was not just something that Dad had thought up to explain Random's absence. We had not seen her at dinner. For all I knew, Dad might have imprisoned or murdered them both.

I was letting my imagination run away with me, and I knew it. I tried to put things into perspective. Maybe it was time I confronted Dad with my suspicions and let him explain himself. If I was wrong about him in this, my speculations could only do more harm. I don't want to believe my father is a traitor. He's not much as fathers go, but he's the only one I've got. I owed him a chance to defend himself.

It was about an hour till moon-rise, so Damien left us. He invited us all to go along, but we all declined. Midnight mountain climbing is not my forte. Besides, Tir-na Nog'th has a habit of dissolving away beneath your feet, and I can't fly.

Alex left then, announcing he was going to talk to Vialle, and Damarian mentioned that he was friendly with one of the bards at Court, the one who had sung so mournfully at dinner. He felt we might learn something useful from an outsider, so to speak, someone who was up on Court gossip. I wondered if he was going off to report to Fiona.

That left me and Godfrey before the dying fire. Neither of us seemed to have the energy or the inclination to add more wood. We sat in silence for a while, each lost in our own thoughts.

Finally, I asked him, "Godfrey, what do you think we should do?" He was, after all, the one who had counseled action.

"I've been kicking a number of things around in my head. One thing I think we should do right away, is to call as many of the others into this as possible."

He must have known what I was thinking then, because he smiled and shook his head. "No, I don't trust them either. But if we're all together, we can watch each other, and there's some degree of safety in numbers."

That made sense, when he put it that way.

"How do you propose to find them all?" I asked. "They've probably

scattered by now. I haven't seen Lance since dinner. And that girl you asked us about, Kelcey, never did show up."

"By Trump, of course."

"It's not safe to use the Trumps," I told him.

I figured if he was Dad's spy, opening up like this might allay my father's suspicions. I decided to give him a piece of information, and see how fast it got back to Dad.

"We made two attempts to reach Corwin, this afternoon."

I told him about the experiences we'd had, leaving very little untold. When I came to the part about dropping the monster into Fiona's bedroom, I hesitated, but only for a moment. I found myself wanting her to know that it had been me. And if Godfrey was hoping to score points, well...I would know very soon.

His reaction surprised me. He laughed uproariously. Wiping tears of merriment from his eyes, he said, "So that's what you were up to down there. It looked pretty nasty, so I thought I'd better get Bleys."

"Who ratted us out?" I asked him. "Who told you we were down there?"

He got all kinds of pompous on me again.

"What makes you think we came down there looking for you? I've got better things to do with my time than chase you around all day, bailing you out of trouble. Did it ever occur to you, we might have had reasons of our own for walking the Pattern? You've got a high opinion of yourself."

I found myself taken down a peg or two. Enough of this.

"Anyway, it's not safe to use the Trumps," I insisted.

"Not true," he said flatly. "Harlan checked out all the Trumps today. Only certain ones are hot. Unfortunately --" he paused, as if considering his next statement, "-- the ones we don't dare try are the ones we need most right now."

He let that sink in. Then he ticked them off on his fingers for me. "Random, Benedict, Gérard, Corwin, Martin...."

"Where is Harlan, anyway?" I asked, wanting to thank him for backing me up earlier.

He misunderstood me. "I don't know," he said irritably. "I'm not his keeper."

I dropped the subject.

"You said you were considering several ideas. What are the others?"

"There is another thing I think we ought to do, and as soon as we possibly can. Did you know it's possible to cast the family fortune with the Trumps?"

I didn't, but wasn't going to let him know that, so I just nodded and he continued, "As far as I know, it hasn't been done in years,

although they used to do it all the time, back in the old days, whenever things got sticky. Well, I think the time has come to do it again."

I thought about it. I've never had much faith in fortune-telling.

"What do you hope to learn by that?"

"We should be able to tell from the fall of the cards just who's involved in this, and whether certain people are alive or dead or in trouble. It might give us some insight into what's going on."

It sounded like hocus-pocus to me. But I thought, if it makes him feel better....

"The point is, to get as much information as we can...the fortune, Damien at Tir-na Nog'th, Vialle, and Damarian's connection. We may be able to piece together something that will make sense of all of this mess."

So what could it hurt?

"O.K.," I said, "let's give it a shot."

"Not so fast. We need a full set of the family Trumps. Do you have one?"

"No," I admitted. "Don't you?"

He shook his head. "I've never needed a full set till now. We need everybody, living or dead, hot or cold. I have some, and Harlan has more, of course, but neither of us have a full set. I thought maybe Bleys...."

"Why don't you go ask if you can borrow them?" I suggested sweetly.

"Why don't you go?"

"Oh, no.... You're overestimating my relationship with Bleys, if you think I can do that. He doesn't like me very much, remember? He had me arrested today."

"Oh, well, if you're afraid, I won't press you," he challenged.

I jumped to my feet. I will not admit to anyone that I'm afraid of my father. I am, but I will not admit it.

"Oh, all right, as a favor to you, I'll do it. Wait right here."

As I left the room, I could swear that he was laughing at me.

I hurried to Dad's suite, fuming, because I knew I was being manipulated by the imperious son of a ..... I was in such a temper, by the time I got there, I was ready to take on Dad, Fiona, and the rest of the palace combined. I pounded on the door.

No answer.

I tried again. No answer. I tried the knob. It was locked, of course. I considered going back to my room for the key. I swiped it a long time ago, but I've never had the courage to use it. Then I decided he'd probably be with Fiona.

I knocked on Fiona's door with a little less enthusiasm. I didn't know what I would say if she was there and Dad was not.

Her maid answered. "Oh, it's you, Miss Bronwyn. Will you come in?"

"Is she in?" I asked.

"No, dear, would you like to come in and wait? I could make you some tea...."

Alice is so nice. I can't understand why she works for Fiona. I tried to get her to come to me a few years ago, but she refused. Very nicely, but I guess old retainers are stuck in their ways.

"No thank you," I told her. That was the last thing I wanted. "Actually, I was looking for my Dad. I thought he might be here talking with Fiona...."

"No, I haven't seen either of them since he took her down to dinner, after that horrible incident this afternoon."

She went on to tell me about the monster, and the havoc it had caused. I agreed it was just awful, and made my excuses. I felt a little guilty about having upset Alice.

Next, I checked out the billiard room and the state offices. Then the armory, and finally the throne room. I thought he might have been there, practicing. No Dad. Finally, I went back to the study. Godfrey was waiting.

"No luck," I said. "I can't find him. As far as I can tell, he isn't in the palace."

Godfrey frowned. "Did you try his Trump?"

"Of course," I lied.

"Was it warm?" he wanted to know.

"No, it felt O.K. to me. He just wasn't answering. He does that sometimes," I told him. I figured if Dad was in trouble, he could take care of himself. He wouldn't thank me for interfering anyway.

Godfrey pounded the table lightly with a fist, indicating, I supposed, exasperation at the stalemate. Sometimes he acts as though strong displays of emotion are beneath him, somehow. Bad form.

"Look," I said, mostly to get him off the subject of my father, "if you really want a set, I know where there's half a dozen of them. There's a case of them in the library, under glass."

"I know that," he said. "But it's locked, and Random has the key. I don't intend to break the place up if I can avoid it."

"That's no problem," I assured him, wanting to be of some use. "Give me a moment."

I concentrated. This is a little harder than reaching into Shadow. But with the Pattern, just about anything is possible. It took a little while. I ignored Godfrey's stare. Finally, I reached into the case and removed the first deck on the right. It was huge, and incredibly heavy. The cards were thicker and more ornate, like Dad's. I guess they're not making them now like they used to.

"Here." I offered the deck to Godfrey.

He took them, and put them on the desk between us, as if he was not sure he wanted to touch my ill-gotten goods. Then he changed his mind, I guess, because he picked up the top card and looked at it. It was Oberon, my grandfather.

"Beautiful, aren't they?" he commented, handing me the card. "This is Dworkin's work. Harlan was his student, and he's very good, but even he can't approach this kind of skill."

"Surely, we won't be needing this one," I said. "Oberon's been dead for years."

"His influence is all around here. It's a part of what we are. No, we need all of them."

Absently he fanned the deck. Their faces stared out at me. Dad, Brand, Fiona, Benedict and Corwin, Gérard, Flora, the whole rogues' gallery of aunts and uncles I had met or heard about, and many faces I didn't recognize at all.

"That's Osric and Finndo," he indicated, seeing me frown. "You've heard about them, I guess. And these," he pointed to several other cards, "are a whole other group of relatives you've probably never met. I hope you never have to. They've got problems of their own."

"Are any of them, you know, brothers or sisters of mine?" I asked him, curious in spite of myself.

"Why do you ask?" he laughed. "Worried about the succession?"

You can never best Godfrey with words, so I didn't try. Instead I said, "Well, are you going to do it?"

He shuffled the deck back into order, and set it down on the desk again.

"No," he said. "I think we'll wait for the others to get back. I want to get as many of us together as we can before we try this. Will you have another glass of wine?"

Conversation closed. We sat and waited. I think I may have dozed a bit, because I started up suddenly, as something occurred to me that I had forgotten.

"What is it?" Godfrey asked.

"Oh, nothing." I was lying again. It had occurred to me that I really didn't need a Trump to keep tabs on my father. It was so simple, I couldn't understand why I had never thought of it before. I could open the portal into Shadow, using the Pattern, the way I do when I am looking for something that I want, and just look for Dad. I had used it in the past to find my owls when they'd slipped their traces and I hadn't felt like tramping over miles of countryside to hunt them down. It had never occurred to me to use it to look for a person. I was dying to try it, but didn't want Godfrey to notice. I waited until he seemed lost in his own thoughts, and then I just

looked for Dad.

I tried very hard, I did. I wanted to find him, just to see if it could be done. Finally, I just gave it up. I was seeing, all right, but if Dad was in the palace, or somewhere off in Shadow, it was someplace I couldn't find.

This bothered me more than I wanted to admit. If Bleys turned up missing too, who was in charge? I didn't think Julian was particularly fond of me, and wondered if he'd send me packing. That might not be so bad. At least I'd be out of it. Anyhow, if they locked me up again, they'd be in for a surprise.

Furtively, I tried Fiona. Nothing. Then Julian. I was beginning to doubt my ability, so I looked for Damarian. It was easy. He was in one of the public rooms they keep in the palace for upper class retainers, talking with the man who had sung for us at dinner, a stein of something frothy in his hand. Just as he'd said he would be...hmm....

So it wasn't me. I could do it. Fine.

Now I was beginning to get a little worried about Dad. Not for his own sake, of course, but because of what it might mean. I considered telling Godfrey that I couldn't find any of them, but I realized I would have to tell him how I was looking, and I wasn't sure I wanted him to know. Let it rest, Bronwyn, I told myself. They'll find out soon enough.

I dozed, off and on, for about an hour or so. The palace was so quiet. I was just thinking about going to my room for some real sleep, when Alexander came back.

"Well, that tears it," he remarked, throwing a few more logs on the fire, which was just about out.

"Did Bleys tell us the truth?" I yawned. "Did Vialle have anything to add?"

"Yes and no." He hefted the empty wine bottle, then threw it into the waste basket.

"There's more in the cabinet," Godfrey told him. But he shook his head, and sat down.

"Bleys may have been telling the truth as he knew it, Bronwyn, but there's a little more to the story. Random did go off looking for Mom, and apparently the others are with him. Vialle isn't sure, but she thinks Random had news from someone from down around the Courts of Chaos. Not from the Courts, exactly, but from somewhere near there, if you know what I mean."

We did. They all have contacts out in Shadow, some quite far away, and loyal to the throne, or some family member. After all, that's what my mother had been, until she married Dad...a spy.

"The information was that Mom had actually been seen. Vialle

didn't have any details, but apparently, whatever the circumstances were, it was enough to put Random into a tizzy. (Her words, not mine.) He was so sure it was Mom, that he went off to bring her back himself."

"Why go himself?" I asked. "Why not send Benedict or Gérard?"

"I asked her that, Bronwyn, but she really doesn't know. She is more concerned about Random's state of mind, before he left. She thinks he was very upset by the news, which surprised her, because she'd thought he would have been overjoyed."

"If Deirdre is alive and well out in Shadow, even as far away as the Courts, why doesn't she just come home by herself?"

"Maybe she can't." Damarian was standing just inside the door. No one had noticed him come in. He's sneaky. "Maybe she's lost her memory or something and doesn't know how, like Corwin."

I thought it unlikely. Besides, that would hardly explain why the King would go rushing off himself, taking a lot of other key people with him.

"Vialle had no idea why I wasn't informed," Alex finished. "She was just as puzzled as I was."

"Well, that ties in with what I was told," Damarian added. "It was just announced this morning that Random is officially missing, but just about everybody was aware that something was up. He hasn't been seen in about a week, but that's not such a rare thing. He has friends everywhere, and apparently visits them at will."

He paused for a breath, and went on. We were all listening, and I got the impression he really enjoyed the audience.

"A little over a week ago, a messenger came in from somewhere out in Shadow. Whatever he told Random was just between them, but they say Random came flying out of the state offices, shouting for Gérard to get a hold of Benedict. They say they conferred for a long time, then sent for Martin. No official announcements were made. Soon afterwards, Random and the others just disappeared. No explanations were given."

So, today, Dad had apparently decided to take a hand. I was surprised he had waited so long.

"Then the tale about the border attacks was a feint."

"No. At least, the army has been on alert for some time," Damarian said, and Godfrey nodded assent.

"It's not like Random to go rushing off in the middle of a crisis, no matter what he heard about Deirdre. It must have been pretty important."

We really weren't reaching any more startling conclusions, so we discussed how we would contact the others. Maybe some fresh minds would shed light on the subject.

We each took a few of our new Trumps and attempted to make

contact. We agreed to try to make a group effort if anyone couldn't be reached on the first try.

I drew three blanks, right away: Temar, Argentis, and Damien...or at least, two out of three. Temar and Argentis either declined to answer, or couldn't. I was inclined to believe the former was true, because there was no hint of heat to the cards. I had been handling Corwin's card all day, and the feeling was unmistakable. Damien was another story.

The Trump dissolved almost immediately into Damien. He stood, pale faced in the reflected moonlight, against a background that was gauzy-grey with fog. About him moved figures, too undefined and indistinct to tell me anything about what he was experiencing.

"Who is it?"

"It's Bronwyn, Damien. We've decided it's important that everyone remain close together until this thing is cleared up. We want you to come back."

"Not now!" he hissed, keeping his voice low, as if he thought someone might overhear. "Look, I may be on to something here, but I won't know for sure until the whole thing unfolds."

"Like what?" I asked him.

"I'll let *you* know when *I* know, Bronwyn. Look, I've got to go now. I'll be there when I get there...."

Then he cut the connection.

Damarian was looking at me. The cards he had drawn to call were on his lap.

"What is it? Who was that?" Always, twenty questions from him.

"Damien," I answered. "Apparently, he thinks he's on to something and means to check it out, before he comes in."

"Here, give me that!" He almost snatched the card from my hand. I don't think he meant anything by it. I think he hates to have something going on he doesn't know about.

I watched while he tried to key the Trump, and was secretly pleased when Damien chose not to answer.

Then Alex said abruptly, "I think I'm getting through to Lance. Whew...he seems a long way off."

We waited. After a moment of low conversation, Alexander passed his hand over the Trump and cut the connection. He turned to us, smiling.

"He's coming. Says he'll be here in the morning."

"Why didn't you just bring him through?"

Alex shrugged. "He said something about having to talk to a tree, first...." He smiled again, apologetically. "You know Lance."

That had been his second try. Delian had not answered. Neither had Kayen or Kelcey, who had been Damarian's assignment. We shifted the Trumps around and tried again, on different people this

time. No luck. Godfrey had been trying to reach Harlan, with the same results as we were having.

It was beginning to look like the family was not in, to us....

Alex murmured, "Seems to be my day for long distance calls...."

"Who?"

"Kelcey."

Suddenly, he reached forward and pulled her through. But none of us were prepared for what happened next. She tumbled into the room from a half-crouch, knocking Alex and the chair back about a foot. Out of the rift behind her came a fiery hand and arm, reaching toward her. A horrible, sonorous voice, that I will hear in my nightmares forever, called, as if from the depths of hell, "No.... You shall not have her! She's mine!"

I was awfully glad it didn't want me.

Alex recovered quickly, tightened his grip on Kelcey's outstretched arm, and yanked her back towards him. She tried to scramble, crab-wise, to one side, in a desperate effort to evade the flaming grasp. A fiery head and shoulders sprang from the rift, and the flame creature managed to get a hand on Kelcey, trying to drag her back. For a moment they engaged in a monstrous tug of war.

In the midst of the confusion I heard Godfrey, behind me, spit out one word like a curse: "Brand!"

Every hair on my head tried to stand straight on end.

There was no time to plan -- we just reacted. Alex twisted Kelcey from Brand's grasp. Thwarted, Brand howled in fury, and drove one fiery fist into her side in what appeared to be a mortal blow. She screamed, and collapsed in a heap, a smoldering wound in her belly.

Damarian dove into the fray, wielding a sword I had not noticed he was wearing. Godfrey, too, had drawn his weapon, but was blocked somewhat from direct attack, by the sofa and by Kelcey's crumpled form.

I hit Brand too, with my first and foremost weapon...a bolt of psychic energy. I knew it was useless, even as I tried it. It didn't stop him, but he felt it, because he paused momentarily, and, to my horror, focused his attention on me.

Damarian hit him then, with a blow that would have destroyed a normal man. But Brand backhanded him with his incredible reach, striking him on the side of the head, and knocked him senseless.

Alex had dragged Kelcey out of the thick of things. I hadn't tried. Frankly, I thought she was dead.

I screamed, "Alex, help me!"

He dove sideways with incredible speed, and I felt his hand grasp my shoulder and his psychic power mesh with my own. There was no time for subtlety. I wrenched it in sync. He was not Harlan, but

he would do.

Together we poured out our fury and our fear into the effort that drove Brand back towards the rift...one step, then two. Then he laughed, and gestured to someone behind him that we could not see.

I really expected another of the black, tentacled creatures. I was in for a shock. What came out of the hole into Shadow was another fiery form, different somehow, but just as deadly. I heard Alexander's muffled exclamation, and his hand dropped from my shoulder. I was mystified.

The flaming creature coalesced into a faintly female form, beautiful and terrible at once. Beside me, Alex choked out one word -- "Mom!" -- and reached toward her.

I wasn't mystified any longer, just scared to death. But Godfrey reacted quickly, and probably saved Alexander's life.

"Deirdre, you incestuous bitch!"

It was a taunt and a challenge. It did the trick. Godfrey turned and ran for the door, with the flaming apparition in pursuit. They slammed through the corridor beyond, and I was dimly aware of the pound of Godfrey's feet as he led the thing away from us, and the terrible knowledge that Alex had followed. I was alone with Brand!

For an endless second I stared at Brand, that flaming death's head that could not, should not exist. He advanced a step towards me, hands outstretched. I thought of what he had done to Kelcey, and my mouth went dry.

"Now...for you." His voice crackled like the flames.

Terror overpowered rational thought. What came next was a function of my genetic makeup. The Pattern flickered into being between us, with an audible snap. I do not recall calling it to me. It just was there.

Brand shrank away from the barrier, and I knew that I had him. I took a tentative step forward. He retreated.

I poured all of my will into the effort of driving him back into the rift, which he had somehow maintained, although Alex had long since cast Kelcey's Trump aside. I shoved the Pattern forward until it touched him. He howled with pain.

I advanced again, more confidently now, holding the Pattern before me like shield and weapon both. It forced him backward, toward the only refuge open to him.

Brand had long ago repudiated the Pattern. He had tried to destroy it. Now the Pattern repudiated him.

With a snarl of incoherent rage he backed through the hole in space/time created by the Trump. I slammed the Pattern against it, bars to the cage. I knew I hadn't beaten him, but for a time I had driven him off.

I could see through the lines of green-gold fire, so unlike Brand's

flames, that he seemed to be standing or hovering a few inches above a bridge that appeared to span nothing. I could not see the other side. The Abyss? Perhaps...I had no great desire to study it at length.

I set the Pattern spinning, reducing its size as quickly as I dared, shrinking the opening he had held to a pinpoint, then to nothing. The Pattern winked out and was gone. As the aperture closed, I heard him cry out in a voice thick with fury, "Bronwyn! I'll get you for this!"

Then he was gone.

Bile and sour wine rose in the back of my throat as I dropped to my knees beside Damarian and felt for the carotid. He was alive, just barely.

Somehow, I got across the room to the call bell and hung on it. Faintly, from somewhere, I could hear the jangle I created, followed by muffled footsteps and voices. Panicked, I yanked on the bell rope until guards and sleepy-eyed servants crowded into the doorway, staring aghast at the havoc in the study.

"Get a medical team up here!" I shrieked at them. "Get TWO medical teams up here! We've got people injured, maybe dead!"

The temptation to seek oblivion in the Pattern was strong, and I mastered it with effort. I was still struggling for control as one of the guards came over to me and unwrapped the bell rope from my senseless fingers.

People were working on Damarian. I noted with some relief that they had not covered his body, so he must still be alive. A second medical team arrived in the doorway with their nasty array of bags and instruments, and looked around for someone to care for. I pointed them to the corner where Alex had dragged Kelcey's inert form, but it was empty.

I was beginning to calm down slightly, very slightly. I reasoned if she was gone, she must still be alive. I knew Brand hadn't taken her. Good. If she was alive, she'd soon be wishing otherwise, when I got through with her, bringing all that down upon us. I wished Damarian would wake up and say something infuriating. He didn't. There was still no sign of Alex and Godfrey.

One of the guards approached me, a bit tentatively, as if half-afraid of what I might say or do. I wondered if he thought I had done this to Damarian. But he just said, "I've taken the liberty of sending for your father, ma'am. Are you injured? Will you still be needing the other medical team?"

I began to laugh, and he stared at me as if I had lost my mind. Well, perhaps I had....

"Yes, you do that...send for my father.... Tell the other team to get down to the infirmary and prepare a couple of extra beds, we may have more casualties soon."

He gaped at me. Then he turned and began speaking to the others in low tones. I moved over to where Damarian was lying, trying to ignore my shaking knees. He looked terrible.

There was a small buzz of activity at the door. When I looked up, Godfrey and Alexander were coming in, looking pale and strained, but miraculously alive and uninjured. I was never so glad to see anyone in my life. They strode across the room to my side, shaking off guards and bewildered courtiers as they came.

"Are you all right?" Alexander asked me -- and then in lower tones, so as not to alarm the others, "What happened to Brand?"

"Gone," I told them. "I drove him off with the Pattern."

"How?" from Godfrey.

I shrugged. It is important to keep up appearances. "He can't bear the touch of it. It seems to be the one thing he fears. We'd better keep that in mind. He'll be back, I'll wager."

"I'm sorry I left you like that," Alex began.

"Oh, it's O.K.," I assured him, "I handled it."

(Oh, Lords! How I lie.)

It took them a while to clean up the mess and move Damarian down to the infirmary, where he could be hooked up to the various equipment we keep available. He looked like death itself and was in a deep coma, but the general consensus was that he would pull through. I hoped so. He could be annoying and a bit intimidating at times, but I believe I have mentioned that I really did like him, and the others. I was also uneasy that our already fragile ranks had been diminished, even by one.

It occurred to me that we had very little in the way of defenses, now that the scope of the problem was clear. Problem? I mean disaster! It was much worse than I think anyone had guessed, except maybe Random. I wondered if that was why he'd rushed off so abruptly. We had done O.K. so far, but I knew if the situation continued, we would need reinforcements. I began to wish that Lance would get here. I began to wish I could find Dad.

We spent some thought, and a lot of time, constructing a cage made of lines of force from the Pattern around Damarian's bed. It wasn't much, and wouldn't restrict the normal flow of care and movement. But what it would do, I hoped, was keep Brand out. I had no idea how far he would go to get his revenge or what form it would take. I couldn't leave Damarian without protection in the face of that.

Wearily we trooped back upstairs to the study. There was nowhere else to go. It was very late, or very early, rather. About four in the morning, I guessed, seeing streaks of predawn light in the sky over the ocean. I've read a lot of stuff about rosy-fingered dawn. This one looked like a mailed fist.

Lance was waiting for us in the study. We fell on him with cries of delight. He probably thought we were faking, but he took it in good stead, frowning a bit as he listened to our jumbled tale of woe.

I heard for the first time of Godfrey's frantic dash from the study, down all those flights of stairs to the Pattern room, with the flaming Deirdre-thing in hot pursuit (no pun intended) smashing into walls in her mindless rage. You can still see the scorch marks in some of the lower regions, they've only cleaned the ones upstairs.

He led her onto the Pattern, struggling to gain the center before she caught up with him. When he saw that she was going to make it to the middle with no injury sustained, he teleported himself to the edge. Alex caught up with them then, in time to see her reach the center, where she flared briefly, and seemed to resume what they remembered as her true form.

There were a few seconds where she seemed to recall her former personality. A few words were traded, I forget what. Then, as if in answer to some unseen summons, she flared back to a thing of fire and was gone.

It occurred to me that if the Pattern did not affect her as it did Brand, perhaps she was not beyond salvage. I said as much to Alexander, but he just shook his head, looking dejected.

We were silent for a while. Then Lance told us a little of his experiences. Apparently he had Trumped himself, somehow, into a Shadow of his father's Pattern. We have THE Pattern, but Corwin has his own. While Lance was there, he spoke to the World Tree, which is a sort of guardian or watcher on the fringes of all there is. The tree was disturbed, he told us, about a massive fire somewhere, that threatened all existence. It had charged Lance with the task of putting the fire out. There had been a few too many fires and flame-creatures in the past day for this to be a coincidence. The connection was obvious.

As I listened to Lance's tale, I was struck by the inevitability of it all. It seemed we were being drawn into an inexorable sequence of events. Will we or nil we, it seemed to me that only one course of action was open to us. Even Lance, the nonconformist of all nonconformists, had been forced into action.

"I don't understand, Lance," I told him. "Why did Ygg appoint you as Fire Chief? How did he know you were involved?"

"I kind of volunteered," Lance admitted sheepishly.

"You what?!?" We were flabbergasted!

"I sort of asked Ygg if there was anything I could do for him," he mumbled.

Poor Lance! How he hates to be caught out in the occasional lapse into valor. I'm convinced he's afraid it will spoil his image.

A pretty turn of events. I imagined a great puppeteer-

—somewhere off beyond Chaos, if such a place exists—pulling all of our strings, and we below dancing away, beyond all of our rational power to resist. The thought did not sit well. I refrained from running it by the others. I was half afraid they'd all be at my throat for suggesting it.

"We need help," I admitted. "I'm afraid I'm way out of my depth here."

Surprisingly, they all agreed. We may be an arrogant family, but none of us are stupid!

"Right!" Alexander agreed crisply. "I vote we try to reach the others again."

Nobody had any better ideas, so we tried. No luck with the older generation, those whose Trumps we dared to try. Our cousins, too, remained stubbornly silent, except for Damien. Our call found him in the lower hall of the castle, looking worn and tired, his cloak soaked with dew.

"Do you want to come through?" I asked.

"No thanks," he told me sourly. "I've had enough jaunting for one night. I'll take the stairs."

He was with us in moments anyway, and went straight across the room to the liquor cabinet without speaking. We watched him without comment. I thought he was being a bit theatrical.

He didn't bother with a glass.

Alex cleared his throat. "That bad?" he asked.

"No." Damien's voice was testy, tight, frustrated. "Just stupid and meaningless. Oh, once or twice, I thought I was on the verge of something significant. But every time the visions seemed to be getting around to showing me something important...they would change...into something silly and pointless...like they do in dreams, when you find yourself standing in the middle of a city street in your underwear!"

"It was a big waste of time!" he finished flatly, taking another long pull from the bottle.

"Maybe you just dreamed the whole thing," someone suggested, rather nastily.

He rounded on us in anger. "At least I tried! I spent a miserable night trying to find some answers, while the rest of you sat around here doing nothing!"

Doing nothing?

Gleefully, almost, in great detail, we told him of our experiences. The tale, of course, grew a bit with the telling. Stories always do, don't you think? I could tell he was impressed, perhaps a bit sorry he had missed it all. There is no accounting for tastes.

"Brand! Well, that's a kick in the ass!" he observed.

Understatement!

He demanded to see Damarian, so Alex walked him down to the infirmary. We didn't want him to mess with the Pattern shield we had erected, and it was easier to show him than to explain what we had done.

Lance stretched and yawned. "You know, there's one more person I could contact who might be able to help us...."

Godfrey and I exchanged glances.

"Well, out with it, man!"

He grinned. "I never mentioned it before, because, well, he's kind of a loner and likes to keep a low profile. It's my brother, Merlin."

Godfrey nodded knowingly. I was mystified, so they explained a bit.

Merlin is Lance's half-brother. Now here's the wild part...he grew up in the Courts of Chaos. Apparently, his mother is some kind of nobility there! Isn't that juicy? It's a long story and very complicated. You'll have to ask Lance about it sometime, because I don't have all the details, but I'm sure it's quite a tale.

Lance was just full of surprises that morning. He pulled out Merlin's Trump and concentrated, and was soon deep in conversation with this legendary brother. After a few moments, he passed his hand across the Trump and broke the contact. He turned back to us, smiling.

"He's coming. Says he'll be here in an hour or so"

I wondered why he didn't just bring him through by the Trump. These sons of Corwin seem to favor the hellride. I can't understand it.

Alex and Damien returned just then, talking about something in an animated fashion.

"Is Damarian any better?" I asked hopefully.

Alexander shook his head. "No, sorry, Bronwyn, there's no change. But a funny thing happened to us on the way back upstairs." They seemed half amused and half confused about it.

"Funny?"

"Well, odd, anyway. We were accosted in the hall by a talking lizard!"

I felt like I had fallen down a rabbit hole.

"No! I'm not joking!" Alex laughed quickly, to combat our incredulous stares. "We were coming back upstairs from the infirmary, and this little pink and grey lizard jumped out of nowhere onto my shoulder and began talking to me!"

"What does...." Godfrey looked perplexed. "What does this have to do with anything?"

"Lizard! Are you sure it wasn't a salamander?" I asked, thinking about fire-creatures.

"Nahh...." Damien was annoyed. "Those creatures are only legends."

"So are unicorns!" I retorted, and he shut up.

Alex continued his weird tale. "It jumped on my shoulder and said, 'Alexander, all the people you are seeking are prisoners in a place outside the Courts of Chaos, across a bridge that spans the Abyss. You must seek them there.' Then it disappeared."

We just stared at them. They looked perfectly sane, but brimming with laughter. I didn't know what to make of it, and neither did anybody else.

"Sounds like a trap to me," Godfrey muttered, almost as if to himself.

"I don't know," Lance mused. "Doesn't sound much like Brand's style. Too subtle."

Who says Brand can't be subtle? I thought, pondering family resemblances and all that. After all, I know what Dad and Fiona and Damarian and I can claim as abilities.

But I said nothing. Least said, soonest mended. I didn't really want any of them to make the obvious connections.

There was no clear cut answer to all the questions raised by the mysterious talking lizard. If the absurdity of the incident teased us, the ramifications and possibilities were so bizarre we just rejected them out of hand. No more was said about the lizard.

Lance, at this point, decided to go to the kitchen for something to eat.

"Bring something back for us," we requested. He said he would.

All this time, Godfrey had been shuffling through his deck of Trumps. This was not so odd. We all do it occasionally, when we need something to do with our hands. Now he dealt one of the cards onto the table before us.

It was a scene, rather than a person, and we studied it with interest. A castle, it was, oddly elegant, but defensible in a deadly sort of way. I had never seen it before.

"What is this place?" Alexander asked him. Apparently, it struck no chord in his memory, either.

"I don't know," he replied honestly. "It's the only Trump in my deck I can't account for. I don't even remember where I got it. Maybe from Harlan -- he has a lot of odd ones -- but I really don't remember."

We studied the card. The scene was nearly pastoral, but I felt a hidden menace to it all. I was going to mention that to the others, but a look at their faces convinced me that they shared my mood. Even Godfrey.

We waited, and he went on. "I've been doing a lot of thinking, and it occurs to me that the ones who will come out ahead in this are

the ones who have the best information. The more we know, the safer we'll be."

He paused, looking around at Damien, Alex and I, as if he expected disagreement. We were silent.

"Since this is the only Trump in my deck I can't account for, I've decided it symbolizes some knowledge or information that is available to us. Something that we should know."

He looked around at us all. No one was arguing. This was his show. It seemed arcane to me, but who was I to say? He often deals in symbols...maybe it has to do with his profession.

He shrugged. "Anyway, I'm going there. Maybe I can learn something that will be of use to us."

"It's worth a try," Alex agreed. They seemed to be on much easier terms, Godfrey and Alex, since their mad flight to the Pattern room. "Do you want some company?"

Godfrey shook his head. "No," he demurred. "It's better if we don't split up any more than we have to. It's better if we concentrate most of our forces here."

I wondered if he thought me incapable of holding the fort. It rankled...all the more, because he might be right.

"Just hang onto my Trump." He dealt it out of his deck onto the table before us. I wondered about that. He had dealt us a bit of vulnerability. The gesture was a rare one for Godfrey.

We eyed it solemnly.

"Just keep in touch...say...every fifteen minutes or so...in case I need to get out of there in a hurry."

I knew how he must be feeling. I, too, hate to admit I may need anyone's assistance. Godfrey is even more stiff-necked than I am.

Alex nodded. But I decided to drop a fly in the ointment.

"I can do better than that," I told them. "I can follow you through Shadow, watch you every step of the way."

I was taking a big chance, and I knew it. They shot me neutral glances, faces deliberately expressionless.

Godfrey said simply, as if he'd been expecting this all along, "All right, Bronwyn, that may be the best way. Just don't interfere."

I said I wouldn't, and Godfrey seemed satisfied. He concentrated on the Trump for a few heartbeats, then suddenly took a step forward, and was gone.

'We' arrived in front of the open portcullis of the castle on the Trump. The castle took on an eerie reality of moss-covered brick and cobblestones that I could almost feel beneath my feet. Godfrey passed a few fat chickens, scratching for food in the courtyard. He ducked beneath the low lintel, past the arrow-slits that were all but concealed beneath the growth of ivy on the wall. There was no one in sight. It was much too quiet.

Suddenly, the portcullis slammed down behind him/us with a resounding clang. I jumped, and was vaguely aware of the others trying to find out why I had done so. I paid them no mind. I didn't want to miss this.

Godfrey was surrounded by perhaps twenty men at arms, swords and halberds at his throat. I'll give the devil his due. He didn't flinch. He didn't even sweat.

"What have you done with Lord Benedict and his children?" Godfrey's adversaries demanded.

Now, this was interesting! Godfrey dissembled, of course...he's really good at it. He spun them some story about being on a mission from the King, claiming no knowledge of Benedict's whereabouts, and denying any knowledge of his children at all. He was very good. It would have convinced me, if I hadn't known better. If Godfrey ever decides to give up his priest business, he should seriously consider a career on the stage.

The swords waxed closer. These people were not buying this. I was amused.

I was also amazed at Godfrey's level of skill at interrogation. He turned every question they asked him into a question of his own. Neatly as he turned it, he didn't learn much. I concluded that the fault was not his. These people had nothing to tell. They were as puzzled as we were. They also outnumbered him about twenty to one. I was interested to see how he would handle their hostility.

They were becoming more hostile by the moment. That much was plain. I could have taken his Trump and pulled him out at any time, but I didn't. I owed him something for the dungeon, after all, and he *had* told me not to interfere.

The threat drew closer. Such is the link I have through Shadow...it was almost as if the weapons were leveled at my throat, instead of his. Still I waited.

Suddenly Godfrey ducked to one side, out of the reach of their spokesman, or captain, or whatever. As he spun away, he drew his sword and lunged in a quick feint at his captors. The audacity of the charge confused them, and they fell back momentarily.

The captain of the guard grimaced. Godfrey's sword inscribed a tight little circle before his eyes.

I don't know what was showing on my face, but I was vaguely aware of Alexander and Damien, somewhere on the fringes of my consciousness. They wanted something from me, but I was too engrossed in the scene before me to respond.

I have to hand it to Godfrey. He has guts. They were twenty to his one, but he didn't look worried.

He did something then, I didn't catch what it was. To this day, it galls me that I missed the word or gesture or whatever it was that

effected Godfrey's magic. I have no other word for it. I have asked him, but he won't tell me. He won't even explain what I saw.

Suddenly, they were disarmed. The swords dropped from their hands and the halberds warped, useless and absurd! They stared at their weapons and stared at Godfrey. The captain backed away, making the age old sign to ward off the evil eye.

He was still outnumbered. If they decided to charge they might still take him. As this thought passed through my mind I was just a little ashamed by my bloodthirsty attitude. Maybe I was being unfair.

Anyhow, it seemed as if the fun was over. I turned my attention to Alex, who sat before me, Godfrey's Trump in hand.

"Now," was all I told him. He concentrated, and a few moments later Godfrey stood among us once again, sword still unsheathed, but none the worse for wear.

Briefly, he described the events as they had transpired, omitting any information about how he had disarmed his opponents. Once or twice, it seemed, he shot me a level glance, but it may have been my imagination.

"So, they didn't have anything to add," he concluded. "They were badly confused and leaderless. I just wonder why and how I happened to get a hold of a Trump for Benedict's castle."

None of us could help him there. It was just another of the mysteries that confronted us.

A good amount of time had passed since Lance had headed for the kitchens. Gnawing pangs of hunger reminded me of that fact, and I sent Damien to hunt for him. Because I don't trust Damien, I followed him with my mind, as I had done with Godfrey.

He connected with Lance in the kitchen, as I had suspected he would. Lance was adding some kind of vegetables to a huge omelet, in the company of another dark haired young man whom I took to be Merlin, since he looked a lot like Lance.

"Better get back up to the study," Damien told him. "Bronwyn's waiting for you."

"What are you, her bellboy?" Lance retorted.

I was annoyed, but most of all I was hungry. Through my hole into Shadow, I could almost smell that omelet. This was no time to quibble over petty insults.

"Come on," I told the others, "or they'll eat it all before we get there."

They followed me without comment.

The kitchens of Amber Castle are actually a huge suite of rooms, including bakeries, stillrooms and pantries, larger than the entire first floor of my tower at home with the aviary included. It might have been confusing, so I just followed my nose, with

Alexander and Godfrey trailing after.

We were just moments too late. The remains of the omelet, a few tantalizing scraps of peppers and eggs, lay on a large platter between Lance and his brother. Damien looked smug. Apparently, he had been invited to share breakfast.

"Make me one," I wheedled.

"Make it yourself," Lance countered.

I was bitterly disappointed. I do not cook. There is a large staff of people who make sure that I am fed and cleaned-up-after. I exercise other talents. Unfortunately, none of those people were around.

My stomach rumbled in protest. I rummaged in the refrigerators and came up with a platter of fruit, some cheese, and a bowl of jello, left over from dinner the night before. Alexander and Godfrey helped me carry this stuff to the table. Apparently, they aren't culinary artists either.

Lance introduced Merlin, and we spent a few moments filling him in on the details of our adventures to date. I wondered why he hadn't been included in the little get-together on the previous morning. Either he is singularly hard to find, or even Bleys and Fiona wouldn't dare risk offending someone with Chaos connections. Of course, I wasn't boorish enough to question him about it.

At least he was properly impressed with the scope of the problem. He didn't have much to offer in the way of advice, but seemed willing enough to go along with any plan we could come up with.

We tossed around a number of ideas, just sort of thinking out loud, as we ate.

Fact: we were definitely up against Brand, the most dangerous and evil of our nefarious stock of relatives. And it was quite possible that Deirdre was aligned with him, although we reserved judgment (for Alex's sake) as to whether she was a voluntary ally.

Fact: it was beginning to look as if Brand had eliminated or neutralized all of his opposition, excepting ourselves. Whether or not we actually constituted an opposition worthy of the name was a moot point. We avoided discussing it.

Fact: we were in a lot of trouble.

Obliquely, sidestepping as much as was politically possible, we finally got around to asking Merlin if he thought the Courts were involved in the plot. I mean, we DO have a treaty with them, but who knows?

"I don't know," he said, and for what it was worth, I believed him. "You've got me. I haven't heard anything, but then, I don't get home much. They wouldn't tell me anyway, I don't think, for reasons of state security. But that's O.K. with me. I'm not sure I'd

want to know about it if they did."

Lords! Scratch the surface and we're all the same. How can so many people, so intent on avoiding trouble, seem to embroil themselves in so much of it? It must be in the blood!

"If you think it would help, I could call somebody there and ask," he continued. "I'm pretty close to my stepbrother. He MIGHT tell me if something was up, but don't count on it. Are you going to finish that bowl of jello?"

In wordless wonder, I shoved the bowl between him and Lance. They dove into it as though they were starving. It was a big bowl, so I guess it didn't really matter, but they had just finished that enormous omelet!

"You've got a set of Trumps for Chaos?" Alexander asked him.

He grinned. "Sure, where do you think Dworkin got the idea?"

"I don't know if we should do this," I said. "We probably shouldn't take it upon ourselves to suggest that they have broken the treaty, even unofficially...."

There was a persistent pressure at the back of my head, as though someone was trying to tap me on the shoulder to get my attention.

"What is it?" The others were staring at me curiously.

"Trump call," I told them. I bit my lip. "It's very strong. I have a nasty feeling about this."

"Don't let them through. Don't answer!" Lance advised me. "It could be Brand."

Well, he certainly knew where to find us.

"Maybe it's Kelcey, or one of the others," someone suggested -- Damien, I think.

This put me into a dilemma. Not that I am fond of Kelcey, but at this point we needed all the help we could get. I still did not feel good about the contact. It was enormously strong and insistent.

Busy signal, I flashed back, not at home, no answer. Gone fishing...no forwarding address... don't bother me.

The pressure in my head increased.

The others began to move, as if in slow motion, and there was the distinct rattle of swords in scabbards as they repositioned themselves for strategic advantage.

"Whoever it is, he's not taking no for an answer," I told them.

I groped for a snatch of the Pattern, but it eluded me. I had to spend all of my mind resisting the Trump call, it was that intense.

Finally, everyone seemed to be where they wanted to be, except for me. I was glued to my chair, resisting the call, incapable of any other action. I resented this.

"Whenever you're ready, Bronwyn," Alex told me.

I wasn't ready. Didn't I have any say in this? I thought, if this is

Kelcey, I'm going to slap her silly. I opened my mind and let it in.

I smelled them, long before I ever saw them.

They came tumbling out of the air above the table, landing in the welter of platters and food, sending dishes sliding in all directions. An apple skidded sideways in the fray, narrowly missing Damien's head.

I had the impression of one unkempt figure in rusty black, landing face-down in the remains of Lance's omelet. A jumble of wretched, scrawny humanity landed on top of it. From the corner of my eye I saw Lance reach out and scoop the bowl of jello out of their path.

The stench was unbearable! For an instant it occurred to me that our best defense would have been a firehose, for reasons of hygiene, if nothing else.

From the bottom of the heap, a voice whined: "This is terrible! How can you eat this? It's soooo greasy."

I didn't know whether to laugh or gag.

Suddenly, from the rift, there was the muffled bark of an order, and the stinking horde began to uncoil itself and scatter in all directions. A tall figure came striding through the warp, imposing in that he was clean and none too careful about who he stepped on.

Across from me, Merlin was on his feet, and murmuring to his wrist. It was spooky and it stank of Chaos, but he was on our side, so I didn't care. The rest of my cousins were engaged in battles with the filthy creatures, who had jumped off the table to attack them.

The man on the table, the clean one, leveled a menacing stare in my direction, pointed his finger at me, and muttered something in a language I had never heard before. Something hit me like a ton of bricks, right between the eyes. As I dropped, fighting a futile battle for consciousness, I saw Lance fling the bowl of jello at him, hitting him squarely in the crotch. Then I was down for the count.

If you want a description of what happened next, you will have to ask my cousins. I was unconscious for the battle, or most of it anyway. I came to on the floor, with the Pattern swirling before my eyes. I was paralyzed, but, unfortunately, in full possession of my sense of smell.

Under the table, which was eye-level for me, crouched a thin, forlorn figure, garbed in a grimy shift. She raised both hands in front of her in a gesture of surrender, eyes wide and fearful. I did my best to look menacing...or as close as I could come to it, lying with my face in the broken crockery and orange peels.

Someone screamed behind me, and I turned my head. I was immediately sorry I had done so. A million needles and pins raced through my neck and shoulders. My head weighed a ton, and ached abominably.

A young man in a stained doublet and torn hose was falling back against the wall, clutching the stump of his severed forearm, howling like an animal. Lance danced back out of the way of the spurting blood, laughing and brandishing a sword. I was glad someone seemed to be enjoying this.

There was another body slumped against the wall. I wondered if Lance had dispatched them both. All around me, our attackers were throwing down their weapons and pleading for their lives. Apparently, we had won.

Lance was still laughing, as he and Alex dragged me to my feet, dropping me into my chair when my legs buckled beneath me. I braced my arms on the table to hide my weakness, and looked around.

The clean one was lying on the floor, unconscious or dead, I didn't know which. But, frankly, I hoped it was dead.

The rest of our attackers were unarmed, and most were wounded to some extent. My cousins appeared to be unharmed. I was inordinately pleased about that.

"What's going on here?" I demanded, trying to sound calm and self-possessed. "Who are you, and what do you want?"

They didn't seem to know, really. The crow-like figure, still sitting on the table, broke off his tirade of complaints and whined, "We're only here because HE made us come. I don't know why, this is a terrible place...."

"Yes," one of the others agreed quickly. "That's Neemon, our leader. Will you at least let me take care of his wounds?"

They both had gestured to the man who had hit me with the spell or whatever. He was lying nearby, blood seeping from several wounds.

My cousins and I exchanged glances. I could see that Alex and Godfrey wanted to allow it. It was the chivalrous thing to do, I guess.

I shrugged. "Go ahead, do what you can for him."

He moved to comply, kneeling by the body of his fallen leader. He made a brief examination, then suddenly whipped out a small, sharp knife, severed Neemon's head from his body, and flung it against the wall. A small, ragged cheer rose up from his comrades.

He looked up at us. Uncertainty and anger warred in his face, but no fear. "Had to be sure he was dead, the bastard," he said simply, and slumped beside the body of the headless Neemon, shaking.

I thought they might have been grandstanding to save their own miserable lives. You know, blame it on the dead guy and we'll all walk away from this. But they really did seem to dislike him. Someone spat in the general direction of the body. I thought, their manners match their odor.

The thin woman with the big eyes scrambled out from under the table. I had forgotten she was hiding there.

"He won't be telling Dad about us now!" she exclaimed. "We're free! We're finally free!"

Curiouser and curiouser, as Alice would say....

The others responded in kind, except for the crow on the table, who observed, "Maybe Dad will find out about it anyway. Maybe he already knows it. This is terrible! We're doooomed!"

The others ignored him. They seemed too busy pounding each other on the back, or bleeding, to pay him any mind.

First thing first.

"Let's get a medical team down here," I suggested. "These people need help."

I had spent a lot of time in the last day calling for medics. They had to be on fourple time, by now. I crossed to the man with the severed arm, on shaky legs.

"Let me put a tourniquet on that," I said, as soothingly as I could. He wasn't bleeding badly anymore. After the initial spurt, the vessels in his arm had gone into spasm. He was just leaning against the wall in shock.

He shrank away from me in terror. "No! Don't touch me! You're BRONWYN!"

Hmmm...somebody had been badmouthing me. I had no time for this. I reached into his mind and knocked him out. Then I tied up the tourniquet with my scarf, without further interference.

People were pouring into the room, a repeat of the earlier scene in the study. This time, no one was babbling about calling for Dad. They just seemed resigned to the fact that, like it or not, we were the only family members around and would have to do, for directions and things. Old retainers are like that.

Godfrey, Alexander and Lance were taking charge of the walking wounded and those who had escaped injury, rounding them up and searching them for weapons and the like. They were docile, used to being led, it seemed, and gave no trouble.

The black-clad apparition on the table was complaining about just about everything. We tuned him out. The thin woman in the filthy shift plucked at my sleeve.

"Then, you're not mad?" she asked. "You just want to talk to us?" A reiteration of what we had told the guards about their disposition (the popular opinion being that we should relegate them to the dungeon, and clap them in irons without further ado).

I wanted to laugh, but I didn't have it in me. These people seemed even more pathetically ignorant of what was going on than we were.

"No!" I said severely. "We're not mad, but we are very angry! You

broke in here and attacked us, after all. And -- which is worse -- you've upset Cook. Just wait till she sees this mess! We'll be lucky if we get a decent meal for a month!"

It was like talking to a child.

"Oh, no!," she cried. "I'm so sorry! I wouldn't do anything in the world to hurt anyone who cooks FOOD!"

This was a little too much. But, for the life of me, I couldn't find a trace of sarcasm in her voice.

"Get them out of here," I told the guards. "Someone, please, introduce them to the shower and find them some clean clothes. Burn what they're wearing. I want them all in the study in an hour."

"Who ARE you?" she asked me.

I had a Brainstorm. "WE are the United Regency of Amber," I told them.

Lance and Alex exchanged glances, rolling their eyes at each other. There goes Bronwyn....

I didn't care. Somebody in this bloody kingdom had to be in charge. We were meat for the dogs without a leader. Actually, they were just lucky I didn't declare myself as Queen and have done with it. That's what my father would have done.

"What's Amber?"

I was unprepared for that question.

"Never mind," I told them. "Just go along with these people and do as you're told."

They complied without protest. The odor lingered.

I tried to slip out the door behind them, but Alexander grabbed me by the arm. "The United WHAT?" He was glaring at me.

"Count me out," Lance said emphatically. Damien was muttering something in a sullen tone. Godfrey looked outraged.

"Look," I told them, "somebody has to be in charge. Take a look around you. Do you see anybody but us? If it doesn't look like we're all together in this, they'll cut us to ribbons."

I didn't think it was necessary to elaborate on who 'they' were.

Alexander shook his head. "You're playing a dangerous game, Bronwyn," he said.

"We all are," I informed him, "just in case you haven't noticed."

They looked thoughtful, if unenthusiastic. Having made my point, I thought it politic to beat a hasty retreat before they could think of any more objections. If I made them too angry, they could just bug out and leave me alone in the mess.

But, as I turned to leave, one of the guards plucked at my sleeve. "Ma'am, where's the head?"

"The what?" I asked.

We looked around the room wildly for a moment. First to the

corner where we had seen Neemon's head fall, and then around the rest of the kitchen. I took a surreptitious glance under the table. I realized how stupid I must have looked, but I did it anyhow.

Neemon's body lay where he had fallen. His severed head was nowhere to be found. My goosebumps got goosebumps. The faces of my companions told a similar tale.

"Where do you think...?" Damien began, but we shushed him quickly. The guards were regarding us oddly.

"Don't worry about it," Godfrey advised them. "We've taken care of it. Just get this body out of here."

They gathered up the dead and the wounded and left us rather hastily, I thought. We stared at each other in wordless dismay. I felt inadequate. Surely Random, or Dad even, would have had some solution, or at least an explanation for what was happening. Or would they? After all, they were the ones who were missing.

There wasn't much more to be said. I think we were all so badly unnerved by the events of the morning that we were unwilling to resume even our good-natured hostilities. We all drifted away to our separate quarters, with a vague agreement to meet in an hour to hear the Great Unwashed tell their story.

Merlin had been very quiet since the battle. He looked like he was dying to get Lance alone...maybe to beat the living daylights out of him for involving him in this mess. They went off together.

Wearily, I climbed the stairs to my rooms for a hot shower and a change of clothes. My bed was calling to me, but I didn't dare lie down, even for a minute. I was tired, but more than half afraid to close my eyes. The palace was coming awake all around me, and I could hear the maids bustling around in the hallways and calling to one another.

I was in the eye of the hurricane.

An hour later we gathered in the study. Those of our guests who were not confined to the infirmary joined us shortly, still under heavy guard. They had been bathed, mercifully, and provided with fresh clothing from somewhere, and a meal. They looked slightly less pale and pinched, but still very jumpy. We dismissed their escorts and tried to put them at their ease.

This was a task in itself. The flickers of emotion that played across their faces, as we introduced ourselves individually, seemed to regard us as gods or devils or a mixture of both. It took us awhile to get them talking, but once we did, the tale that unfolded was strange, indeed.

For one thing, they didn't know who they were. Oh, they all had names and gave them freely, but nobody seemed to have much of a history to tell. Their only collective recollection seemed preposterous,

but they all swore it was true. In every case, the story was the same.

They remembered an interminable period, enslaved in a place where the skies rained mud and effluvium day and night. Here, they led lives of unending misery, forced to work constantly at meaningless tasks of great physical and mental effort. There was never enough food, little rest, and no relief from the environment.

They were all adults, or nearly so, but none could remember a time when they weren't in that place and when they weren't completely miserable.

Their warden, it seemed, was Neemon, who shared their environment to a point, but seemed to be able to come and go as he pleased. He forced them to perform a number of pointless tasks, and to practice with weapons until they dropped from exhaustion, constantly subjecting them to threats and physical abuse.

Neemon had broken them, physically and mentally, to his yoke. In the end, they would have done anything he ordered them to do. Hence, the attack on us.

"He always told us that if we thought we had it tough with him, we'd better hope he never had to call in Dad to straighten us out."

This had been the ultimate threat. They didn't know who 'Dad' might be, but Neemon had promised a variety of new atrocities at his hands, should he be called.

This information came from the man who had beheaded Neemon. I never did learn his name. He sat with long, thin fingers wrapped around the mug of coffee someone had provided, never quite looking up to meet our eyes. His hands were shaking, and some of the coffee slopped over the rim of the mug and onto his knees. He didn't seem to notice that he had been scalded.

"Why the attack on us?" Lance questioned. "What did Neemon hope to accomplish?"

Eleanor, the wide-eyed woman, answered him. "You're the enemy! We know all about you, Godfrey and Alexander, Lance and Bronwyn. He told us all about you, and about the others. He told us about the things you can do to people, how you want to take everything for yourselves. You're evil!"

Hmm...we had made the most-wanted list with somebody. But if we were evil... what were Neemon and 'Dad'?

Damien regarded them narrowly. "Does the name 'Brand' mean anything to you?"

This drew a blank, but somehow I was not surprised.

One of the servants came in with refills for the coffee and rolls. The Great Unwashed crowded around with muffled cries of delight. They weren't shy when it came to lining up for food. While they were thus occupied, we huddled in the corner for a hasty council of war.

"It's got to be Brand who sent them!" Damien insisted, and

nobody argued, because it seemed the most logical choice.

"The question is, what do we do now?" Godfrey added in low tones. "From a tactical point of view, I'd like to get Amber out of the line of attack. If it's us Brand is after, we've got to direct his attention away from here."

I wasn't sure I liked this idea. Here, by the Pattern, I am strong.

Alex said, "I've been thinking about the lizard, and what it said about the place across the bridge, where all of the prisoners are being held. Maybe we should just attack, instead of just sitting here waiting for Brand to come and pick us off."

"On his own turf?" I asked. "You're crazy!"

Lance shook his head. "He probably won't be expecting us to try to meet him there."

"Look, I saw that bridge," I told them. "It doesn't go anywhere, that I could see. It's got to be some sort of trap."

"You saw it?" Godfrey was looking at me intently.

"Yes, when I pushed Brand back, after you and Alex took off after Deirdre. That's where he went. I know what you're thinking, Godfrey. Yes, I can get there...if I wanted to, which I don't!"

I didn't like the look in their eyes.

"Hey, look," I argued, "we just don't know what we're up against. I've seen it, but I have no idea what conditions are like out there. What if there's no air, or something?"

"I think we can discount that," Alex insisted. "That's where Kelcey was, when I pulled her through."

"She seemed pretty anxious to get away from there," I told them, but it fell on deaf ears. I could almost see the wheels turning as they thought.

"Let's get her back here, and see what she can tell us about the place," Damien suggested.

"Lots of luck!" I told them. "She isn't answering, remember?"

"Maybe a group effort."

So they tried, Alex in the forefront because he had reached her before, Lance and Damien lending their power to the call. I turned back to the Great Unwashed, who were ignoring us with a decided lack of curiosity. I didn't really blame them. Godfrey watched us all, fingering the hilt of his sword. Merlin leaned against the mantle, apparently lost in his own thoughts.

I remember thinking we were jumping from the frying pan into the fire. I had no idea how prophetic I was.

Incredible as it seemed, Alex was successful. With the others behind him, he had little or no trouble reaching Kelcey. They argued back and forth for a few minutes, but finally he reached out and pulled her through.

Kelcey was looking frail and feminine in her rose-colored tunic

direction, as though unwilling to align herself with us, but uncertain of where else she could go.

"Who are they?" she asked, and we explained as far as we could. Then Lance told her about our plans to attack whatever was on the other side of that bridge.

"Then you did get my message! I wasn't sure my creature had gotten through."

"That was *your* lizard?" Alex asked incredulously.

"But of course! I shaped it in my colors, after all! I was sure you'd recognize it as coming from me!"

I listened with a twinge of nausea, while Alexander apologized profusely for not realizing that the little pink and grey lizard had come from Kelcey. Her colors! How quaint!

"How did you know that the others are prisoners there?" Lance cut through the accumulated sugar.

"Oh, because that's what the awful flaming man told me," she said. "Uninvited guests, he called them."

"Who? Did he say who all was there?" Lance asked urgently.

"Well, Benedict, my father, for one, and all of the others who are missing, I guess. At least I got the impression that all of them are there."

Merlin uncoiled himself from the mantle-piece and moved to Lance's side. "I guess that means Dad, too," he said.

"Yeah," Lance agreed. "We'll have to go in after them now." His hand brushed the sword at his side.

"Who was that awful flaming man, anyway?" Kelcey asked plaintively.

I rounded on her, sick of the sweetness and light. "That was your Uncle Brand, dear," I told her, and she shrank away from me, looking as if she were going to swoon or something. But I couldn't tell if it was me or Brand that caused the reaction.

The men were talking tactics now, brave little generals all, except for Damien, who thought we should go to Arden for reinforcements. I know he was hoping to find Julian, who would, of course, have taken the matter out of his hands. We managed to convince him it would be useless, and he subsided, but he didn't look enthused.

He did have a point though. We all were agreed that we were desperately weak, to be bearding Brand in his den. Who could tell what forces he could bring to bear upon us?

"Look what he did to them." Godfrey gestured to the Great Unwashed, huddled across the room. "They're completely cowed...mind-wiped, too. That takes some pretty heavy power."

A germ of an idea was beginning to form in my head.

"It may not be necessary to jump directly into the mess," Merlin

was saying. "I do have some connections at the Courts. They may not be too happy about all of this happening right at their front door, so to speak."

"What do you suggest?" Godfrey asked.

"I can probably punch us through to the Courts by Trump," he replied. "It won't be easy from up here, we're a long way off, but with your help I'll get through. From there we can get a look at the situation from close at hand. Maybe they'll have some information that will help us decide what to do. It's worth a try, and certainly better than walking in cold."

"A whole lot faster, too," I observed. They had been intending to HELLRIDE there, for pete's sake!

"Will they help us?" Godfrey asked.

Merlin shook his head. "Military help? Don't count on it. But they won't stand in our way either. If we describe it as a family vendetta, they'll understand well enough. They'll probably just get out of the way, and hope we kill each other."

I guessed that might not be too far from the way it would be, but I hoped he was wrong. Now I decided to run my idea by them, and see what they thought.

"What about them?" I asked, nodding towards the Unwashed, who were regarding us with a faint glimmer of curiosity, at last.

"Well, what about them?"

"Maybe we can get them to help. There's power there, certainly...one or two of them are pretty strong. If we can convince them that 'Dad' and Brand are one and the same, they may be willing to be the reinforcements we need. For revenge...." I let it hang.

"Reinforcements, or cannon fodder?" Godfrey asked, favoring me with a suspicious look.

I was wounded. "Oh, come on, Godfrey. You know who is going to wind up being in the front. The person with the best command of Pattern. It's the only thing we know for sure that works. I'm not crazy about going down there, but we don't have any choice. But, if I'm going, I'd like to know there is as much power behind me as I can possibly get."

"Hmmmm...."

We all looked at them at once. Aware of our scrutiny, they shrank away.

I tried to smooth my face into a bland expression. We rose, as one, and approached them. They looked apprehensive, and I couldn't really blame them.

We let Godfrey do the talking, since he's the one with the most experience at preaching to crowds. I must admit he was convincing, explaining the situation as briefly as possible, and putting forth the

possibility that their enemy and ours were one and the same.

Some of them, he convinced only too well! At least half their number flatly refused to have anything to do with the project, their fear of 'Dad' outweighing their desire for revenge. What did seem to impress them, however, was the fact that they were being given a choice, and that no reprisals were forthcoming for those who refused to aid us. That seemed to spark some loyalty from those who agreed. I wasn't sure I trusted them, but we were fresh out of options.

With our plans more or less set, those who had decided not to join us were allowed to return to the rooms we had ordered prepared for them, under guard, but otherwise unmolested. The less they knew, the better.

Our council of war expanded, we prepared to help Merlin call the Courts of Chaos by Trump. The newcomers were interested, but wary. They were content to let us make the decisions, which was all to the good, as far as I was concerned.

In silence, Merlin concentrated on his Trump, with me and Alex and Moradin -- the strong mind among our new allies -- on hand to lend assistance, if necessary.

After a few moments, Merlin indicated that he was going to need our help. He had warned us this might be so, and I was not surprised. Pushing through from one power center to another can never be an easy task.

I opened my mind and meshed with Merlin -- whose essence was remarkably well ordered and steady -- with Alexander's familiar and comforting hum, and with the untrained power that was Moradin. An impression of great empty expanses... strange colors...and a crazy, wheeling sky, swam momentarily before my inner vision.

Before it could steady into tangible form, I heard Merlin, beside me, shout a warning, and suddenly he was dragged from my grasp into the rift we had opened.

A great wave of intolerable heat blasted me, confirming my worst fears. I felt myself being drawn forward, and struggled to regain control. The crackling of flame was all around me. Frantically, I reached behind me, groping for something to anchor me to anything that was real and safe. I managed to grab a handful of material -- someone's cloak, I hoped. Maybe he or she could save me from the flames.

I was conscious of a muffled yell behind me, from the person I was holding onto.

"Oh, noooo...this is terrible," he whined.

Panicked, I fought for purchase on the floor of the study, which seemed to be dropping away beneath my feet. Screaming, I fell into

the fire!

A lot of time has passed since these events went down. I'd like to think I'm calm about it now, and that I can talk about it freely, without all the panic and melodrama. I'm not sure that I can. I'm not sure I want to try.

Have you any idea, at all...of what it's like to feel that you're on fire? I mean, really on fire?

I'm not going to describe it for you, and that's that! The only thing I'll say is that I still get the nightmares. Not as often as I used to, but when I do, I grab a bottle of brandy and go down to sit in the surf, right below the water line. I stay there until the sun comes up or the bottle is empty, whichever comes first.

Ask any of the others, and you'll hear all sorts of tales about all the brilliant things they thought and did while trapped in Uncle Brand's inferno. Well, maybe they did and maybe they didn't. Frankly, I think it's all a pack of lies, but who knows? I was too busy trying to save my own skin and sanity to pay much attention.

Here's the bottom line. Nothing worked.

Naturally, at the first sign of extreme danger I dove into the Pattern and turned the power all the way up to "Mother". As always, this was fine. Nothing can touch me there. Problem was, I had to come out sooner or later, and every time I tried, it was just as horrible as it had been the time before. So I just dove back in again.

I did this for quite some time, I think, and each time I tried to call the Pattern up it got harder to do so. Much harder! Finally I realized that I probably wasn't going to be able to do it again. Now I was really scared.

I made one last attempt to walk the Pattern in my mind and pull myself out of the mess, but I didn't have much hope because I'd tried it before, of course, without success. I was really surprised then, when it seemed to be working. I centered my concentration on the Great Pattern in Amber and tried to project myself into the middle, feeling that if I was going to be safe anywhere, that was the place. It worked, sort of....

I seemed to be standing there, where I wanted to be, with the Pattern undulating around me. I noticed some of Caine's dinosaur demons scattered around the perimeter, looking like they were on guard or something, and I wondered briefly if they could see me and would tell Caine that I was there. Then I realized they couldn't. I couldn't see myself!

Apparently, my body had stayed behind in the fire. Only my mind and consciousness were free. Now, this was pretty weird. An out of body experience I hadn't come across before, probably because I was never quite as desperate as I had been as Brand's...uh...guest....

O.K., smartie! What are you going to do now?

I was getting pretty tired of feeling ineffectual and helpless. Then I had what seemed like this great idea. I'd find another body and take it over, so I could go back and rescue my own. I'd make the others come with me, too...if there was anyone left, that is....

Where to find a suitable carcass? Briefly, I considered Damarian. The last time I had looked in on him, he had still been unconscious, so his body wasn't being used for anything important at the moment. The idea had great appeal, until it occurred to me that I really had no idea how much damage he had taken. I mean, it really wouldn't have done me much good to be paralyzed or something!

Servants were out. I wanted the others to listen to me. I couldn't see them paying much attention to a butler who claimed to be Bronwyn. O.K., so I'm a snob!

I didn't relish looking like one of Caine's monsters. That had bad connotations!

That left a slim cast of characters. It would have to be one of my cousins. Without further ado, I projected my consciousness to the little study where we had been meeting during the crises. They were bound to be there. I'd just pick the one with the weakest mind, and try to take over...hmmmm, maybe Damien....

And then I was there. As an aside, I must admit that I had just made the first of a serious set of misconceptions, that nearly proved my undoing later on. I was seeing this all as a form of astral projection, and assuming that I could do all sorts of things I'd read about. You know what they say happens when you "assume".

But back to the scene on hand. The first thing you notice, of course, is the noise, which is directly proportional to the number of us assembled in any one place. Naturally, they were arguing.

They seemed to have chosen up sides. On one hand were Godfrey and Harlan, which was not unusual. But the other faction surprised me. It was Kayen, who had been missing since Dad's little dinner party. He had two other guys in tow, who seemed to be in his 'amen' corner. I had no idea who they were, or where they fit in. But everybody was treating them with a lot of deference, so I figured they belonged somewhere in the family. His other ally was our charming cousin, Damien.

Eleanor, the only member of the Great Unwashed in evidence, was flitting between the two factions like an arbitrator. But no one seemed to be paying too much attention to her. There was no sign of Merlin, Lance, Alex or Kelcey. It didn't look like they'd had much luck escaping from Brand, either. I began to feel a little better. At least my mind was free.

Out of habit, I guess, I gravitated toward Godfrey and Harlan.

Godfrey had at least been trying to help us, the night before, and Kayen had been missing a little too long for my taste.

That was when I made what looked like a fortuitous discovery. On the floor by the sofa, almost out of sight and apparently forgotten, was a body that appeared to be unconscious or asleep. At least, the chest rose and fell with comforting regularity. The good news was that it appeared whole and undamaged. The bad news was that it was a dead ringer for Harlan.

Now don't get me wrong, I have nothing at all against Harlan. He is one of the very few of my relatives who had actually done something to earn my respect. I didn't know him well enough to be aware of any great flaws in his character, but his power is impressive, and, after all, he had done a really nice job with my Trump. I mean, it really is flattering...never mind!

The body was handy, and apparently not that important, because no one was trying to bring it around, or had even made any attempt to make it comfortable. I mean, it was lying there on the floor and being ignored. It seemed suitable enough for my purposes. The only drawback was that it looked like Harlan.

I was going to have to think this one over. I did...for about thirty seconds. Any old port in a storm, as Uncle Caine would say!

I attempted to project my mind into the unconscious Harlan, and although it felt strange it was really much easier than I had hoped. The host did not resist, and I could only hope that my stay would be brief and I could get out again before I had to figure out how the plumbing worked. I was in.

It took a few minutes to bring the new body back to full consciousness. I came awake to a tumult of shouts. "So what else is new?" I thought, trying to shove the fuzziness away. Then I realized they were shouting and pointing at me. One of the ones I didn't know had drawn a sword and was pointing in my direction.

"Watch out! That's a real strong psyche!" someone was shouting.

The guy with the sword was ready to run me through, and I had to do something fast.

"Wait! Hold on! It's me, Bronwyn!" I shouted, shocked because my voice sounded deep and strange.

They weren't buying it, I could tell.

Somebody grabbed me and dragged me to my feet, which didn't seem to want to work the way they should have. I got buffeted around a bit, while they tried to decide whether to kill me or not. Finally the voice of reason seemed to prevail...or maybe it just shouted louder than the rest. Harlan, at least, seemed curious enough to want to find out who or what had wound up in his double, and finally he and Godfrey convinced the others to back off for a bit so they could get to

the bottom of it.

I was relieved. Godfrey, who was literally holding me by the scruff of the neck, shook me once more and dropped me into a chair.

"All right, then," he demanded. "Explain!"

"I got pulled...." I stopped, and cleared my throat. I was no use. This was the voice I was going to have to use.

"I got pulled through with Merlin and some of the others when we tried to push through to Chaos...."

We *know* that," he cut in, impatiently. "You're the only one who managed to get back. Mind explaining how?"

It didn't sound much like a request. I took a deep breath.

"It's kind of a long story. Brand seems to have found a way to punch through and control Trump contacts at will. I don't know if had can do it all the time, or if it's selective, but he pulled us through to this fiery place. It was awful!"

I paused, but they didn't seem to notice my discomfort. I skipped over the description....

"The fire made it...uh...impossible to concentrate, and I couldn't think of anything to do. There was no way I could fight Brand in that place! I tried to walk the Pattern in my mind, but something went wrong. Only my consciousness got free. The rest of me is still back in the fire. I had to find another body, so I could tell you what was going on."

Godfrey looked skeptical. Kayen pushed past him, and began firing questions at me.

"Is Brand there?"

"I didn't see him, but I think, yes."

"What about the others?"

"I'm not sure, maybe, yes...I think I saw Merlin...."

"Anyone else? Random, Benedict...? Think!"

(Think? Who do you think you're talking to, soldier boy?) He was beginning to annoy me.

"Look, I told you. Everything was on fire. I didn't do much sightseeing!"

He backed off a bit. Not much.

"O.K., this place of Brand's. Could you get back there? Maybe bring the rest of us through with you?"

I grinned. Now you're talking, buddy. That was exactly what I was hoping for.

"You mean to invade him? It'll be tricky. We'll need some kind of defense against the fire. You can't imagine what it's like...."

"But, you can do it?" he persisted. "You can find the place again?"

"Of course," I told him. "I can go anywhere I've been before. All I have to do is walk the Pat...**Huh**!" And I choked on the rest of it. Reality jumped up and hit me between the eyes, and I doubled over

with the shock. The Pattern was gone! I was Pattern blind.

Never, in my worst nightmares, had I ever envisioned feeling like this. My extreme reaction must have startled the others, because they began shouting and pounding me again.

"What's the matter with you?" It was Godfrey, with Kayen peering suspiciously over his shoulder.

In a shaky voice, I tried to explain. It almost defied rational description, but he seemed to get the gist of it. From somewhere, I hear Harlan chuckling.

"Well, what did you expect, from that body?"

I managed to be insulted.

The Pattern is *part* of me!" I protested. "And this is me, inside here, no matter what I look like! Why isn't it working?"

He shook his head, still amused. Godfrey looked exasperated.

"Pattern imprint is genetically linked. If you wanted Pattern, you should have chosen the body of an Amberite."

"What?" I was astounded. I looked down at myself, and then at Harlan.

"Our Shadows never have the ability for Pattern imprint. Can you imagine what a mess that would be? Besides, I don't have Pattern anyway."

Now, I had known that from our brief psychic link in the Pattern room. It had never occurred to me to wonder why, or even how he had managed to get along without it. The concept was pretty near unthinkable, as far as I was concerned.

"What am I going to do?" I wailed.

Godfrey just shook his head, impatient with my hysteria. Kayen turned away in disgust, and went back to discussing battle plans with his cohort. Apparently the invasion was still on, although I had no idea of how they meant to accomplish it without a fix on Brand's stronghold.

Godfrey drifted off in their direction, with Eleanor in his wake. They all began talking about how to handle the fire and the heat. One of the strange relatives, whom no one had bothered to introduce, was dispatched into Shadow to track down some protective gear. I envied him.

They were all leaving me alone, and I was grateful.

Harlan was shuffling through his Trumps, which he is wont to do in times of stress...and just about any other time, as well.

"Are they still hot?" I asked him, just to have something to think about other than my present predicament.

"Some of them," he answered, looking at me and shaking his head. "Sorry, this is really weird. Like looking in a mirror, or talking to yourself."

I shrugged. "It was the only body around that wasn't...occupied."

I didn't bother to apologize.

He seemed to consider that for a moment, then went on. "The cards are about the same as before, with a few obvious additions: Lance, Alex, Merlin, Kelcey, and that new guy...what was his name?"

"Moradin," Eleanor supplied. I had forgotten she was there.

"Anyway, that accounts for the changes. It doesn't surprise me, considering what you've told us."

"What about the older generation?" I asked him. "Has anything changed with them?"

He frowned. "What do you want to know?"

"Well, what about my father, for instance? Is his card hot? Does Brand have him?"

"Bronwyn, Bleys' card was never hot. Brand doesn't have him," he told me flatly.

I gave him a sharp look. He seemed so sure, but there was a funny look on his face, as though he was wondering how much he should say.

"Well, then, where *is* he?" I asked, angered that my father was not on hand to help, if he was free and there was so much trouble. Just last night, he had been mouthing platitudes about how we should all rally around the Unicorn banner and defend Amber, and now he was apparently at large, and nowhere to be found. I was furious.

"Look, a little earlier, while you were still, uh, with Brand, I tried a little experiment. I decided that, if there was some way Brand could draw people through the Trumps against their will, and if some of the Trumps were hot, the person to ask for advice was the man who invented them in the first place."

"You went to Dworkin?" I asked, incredulous that anyone would actually *choose* to do this.

Harlan flushed slightly. "You're wrong about him, you know. He's not a madman. He's very wise, and he knows everything there is to know about the Trumps. He taught me a great deal."

"I'll take your word for it," I told him. "Go on."

"I wanted to ask him what was wrong with the Trumps, so I called him on his. At first I thought he wasn't going to answer, but I kept trying, and finally I got through.

"I thought he seemed a little disturbed to hear from me. He's usually very decent unless he's working on something, but I got the distinct impression he didn't want to talk. I asked him what was wrong with the Trumps, and he said 'Nothing.' I couldn't believe my ears."

"He's crazy!" I stated the obvious.

"No, he isn't," Harlan insisted. "But he certainly was acting very

strangely. I started to explain about how some of them were hot, and the other problems we were having, and suggested that he check his own deck."

"And?"

"And he assured me that there was absolutely nothing wrong with the Trumps. According to him, they were all functioning normally. No problems. No hot Trumps."

"This," I said, exasperated, "is supposed to convince me that he's sane?"

"No, not at all. I just mean that his answer made me suspicious. I had the distinct impression that he wasn't telling me everything, or that something or someone was preventing him from speaking freely."

I muttered something unpleasant. He ignored my show of temper.

"I decided to try another approach. His caves are very near the Primal Pattern...in fact, they're connected to the area by a long tunnel. Now, I have a Trump for the Primal Pattern, so I thought I'd take a look around and see if I saw anything to suggest that he was a prisoner or something. I got a good look at the Pattern and the surrounding area. There's nothing wrong with *that* Trump."

"So, what did you see?"

"At first, nothing that made me any more suspicious than I already was. There wasn't anyone in sight. Just old Wixer, the gryphon, who guards the place."

I waited, as patiently as I knew how. I figured he'd get around to telling me whatever he knew in his own good time, and I was afraid if I hurried him he would clam up. He seemed to be choosing his words very carefully.

He went on, finally. "Well, to make a long story short, I used a kind of trick on the gryphon. He eats horses, you know, loves 'em. He's had his eye on Rembrandt for ages. I made him see, or sense, Rembrandt down the tunnel towards Dworkin's rooms. He took off running and went charging down the corridor, straight toward where I knew Dworkin would be."

With an effort that cost my curiosity plenty, I refrained from asking how he did this. Sometimes you can get more useful information by *not* being too nosy. I waited for him to continue.

"Dworkin was sitting at a table with several Trumps laid out in front of him, just as he had been when I had called him earlier. He wasn't alone. Your father and Fiona were with him. I made Wixer see the horse right by the table where they were all sitting. When he came barreling in, they all had to jump and make a run for it."

Harlan paused and grinned at me, as if he were enjoying the memory. I grinned too, and asked in my best conversational

manner, "How did you manage to see all that, from a Trump of the Primal Pattern?"

He shot me a sharp glance. "Well, I was kind of seeing it all through the gryphon's eyes at that point."

He hurried on before I could ask any more questions. "They were all running around trying to figure out what was going on, and I thought they were getting pretty suspicious, so I figured I had better drop the whole thing before they caught on to me. So I did, and that's all I really know about it, except that your father is not a prisoner, and apparently he has something up his sleeve. What, I don't know."

He broke off, dropped his eyes to his Trump deck, and began shuffling again. End of conversation. I wondered if he regretted telling me as much as he had. I let him brood about it for awhile. There's nothing mean about me.

The others had resumed their arguments, and nothing productive seemed to be happening. I had very little to offer as far as combat plans were concerned, and I felt that they wouldn't have bothered to listen to anything I said anyway. Their faces were flushed and animated, and I realized with a sense of wonder that they seemed to be *enjoying* themselves.

I spent a few helpless moments worrying about my body, and so as not to feel completely selfish I also worried about Lance and Alexander, and anyone else that Brand had trapped in the fire. I wondered what Brand would do to them if he found out we were planning to invade him. The inactivity was beginning to wear on me.

Harlan sat quietly to my left, shuffling through his deck.

"May I see them?" I asked, just to have something to do.

He shot me a look, as if I'd asked to borrow his toothbrush.

"No!" he said emphatically, then amended, "I'd much rather you didn't handle them."

I shrugged. Some people are particular about their things, I guess. I should have known.

I could tell it was going to be a long afternoon.

We were just hanging out there in the library, arguing from time to time as usual, and nothing much was getting done. I was getting pretty impatient with matters as they stood. My body was in terrible danger, and no one seemed able to come up with anything that sounded, even remotely, like a workable plan. Without Pattern, I was useless as an ally and the longer I stayed out of my body, the worse I felt...as though I might not be able to go back.

The guy they had sent out into Shadow to look for the fireproof suits hadn't returned. It was my guess that he didn't plan to come back, and I didn't blame him. If I'd had a safe haven somewhere,

I'd have made a run for it myself.

I got to wondering a lot about Dad, mainly to keep my mind off my own problems. I figured he was up to something, and if I'd had to place a bet, *no good* would be my best choice. I never really bought all that loyalty to the crown stuff. It seemed likely to me that he was probably off making arrangements to keep Random out of the picture...permanently!

It didn't surprise me that Dworkin was his ally. The old coot had always liked Dad and Fiona...he'd even liked Brand, once. I began wondering if maybe they all weren't in this together, with Brand acting to take my uncles out of the picture, while Dad and Fiona consolidated power for a coup. I had this wild idea that maybe I should just go up to the Throne Room, convene what was left of the court, and declare myself Regent in Random's name. I figured Dad and my Aunt could yank me off the throne, physically, if they wanted to, but they might not be willing to do so in front of witnesses.

Without my Pattern, I wasn't good for very much else....

I looked around at the others, wondering what they would think of such a move. I doubted that Kayen, and probably Godfrey too, would give me any support, but the real stopper was this desperate feeling that I had to get back to myself, my real self, if I hoped to survive much longer.

The inaction was maddening!

As I have said, we were all just sitting there waiting for something to happen.

Eventually, of course, it did.

Damien and the guy with the big sword had gone down to the kitchens for something to eat. Eleanor left to get some embroidery yarn from her room...so mundane....

Suddenly she was back, eyes bugging out and practically hysterical. Seems her room is somewhere near where Llewella has rooms when she's here in the Castle, and on her way to her quarters she'd happened to pass by Llewella's door, which was open a crack...or so she says....

Well, she couldn't resist a peek.... This is why men make jokes about women and cats and curiosity. I guess she really didn't expect anyone to be there. Someone was.

Llewella was crouched in the center of a smoking pentagram etched into the floor of her sitting room. She had some kind of sword in her hand. When she saw Eleanor in the doorway she was startled, then angered, and called out to Eleanor to go away and stay out of business that would be too dangerous for her to know about...much less witness....

I guess the poor kid didn't need much more encouragement than that. She turned tail and dashed downstairs again, and by the time

she reached the study she was pretty incoherent, but that's the gist of it.

Naturally, our big brave menfolk decided to investigate, and since I was temporarily (I hoped) one of them, I went along for the show. It was better than doing nothing, after all. Eleanor had flatly refused to go along, but when she found out she was going to be left alone in the study she decided to accompany us, bringing up the rear and muttering all sorts of dire warnings about what would happen if Llewella caught us spying on her ritual.

Godfrey led the way. He seems to be familiar with where everyone's rooms are located in the Castle. I've often wondered about that.

Of course, it turned out to be a great big anticlimax! When we got to Llewella's rooms there was no sign of her, and nothing else seemed amiss. For the record, we made a thorough investigation of the sitting room, and the boys even rolled up the rug to see if there was any sign of the pentagram on the floor beneath. Nothing!

I was disappointed. If Aunt Llewella had some kind of plan that might have offered a solution to our problems, I for one would have been more than happy to hold a candle and chant in the background. Sounded like that Old Black Magic, did Eleanor's description. But there was no trace of anything spooky in the room.

So we all went downstairs again.

Now the guys were muttering and casting dubious glances in Eleanor's direction, and I was glad to be out of the limelight. We were all settling down again, when Damien and Big Sword came back from the kitchen, triumphantly urging another veteran of Brand's fire before them.

It was Moradin, Eleanor's erstwhile companion in captivity, and he was complaining loudly, as usual...which was music to my ears. The last time I had seen him was just before I fell through the Trump hole into Brand's inferno. In fact, I had actually pulled him through with me as I'd tried to grab onto something, anything, that would have provided me with a safety line. Well, that hadn't worked, and I suppose, in my panic, I must have let him go.

Now, here he was, alive and unharmed and obviously in his own body. No one could have faked that querulous whine. Not on a bet!

I reasoned, if he could get free, so could I. We all gathered around to hear how he'd done it, but it was really difficult to separate the facts from his steady stream of complaints and invective about all the trouble this was causing him. The gods take care of fools and babies, so they say....

Somehow, he had survived the flames. Perhaps he was just too deranged to take them seriously.

"I walked around for a little while," he told us. "Then I saw that guy...you know, the one who was going to take us through to that other place...."

"You mean Merlin?"

"Yeah, that's the guy He was trying to tell me something, but I couldn't understand him...he kept waving his arms and pointing to things...it didn't make *any* sense. Then he threw me his thing...."

We exchanged glances.

"It's all creepy, and it tangled around my wrist." He held up his arm for emphasis. There was nothing there.

"And it feels like it's aliiive!" he wailed, and the light dawned. Frakir!

If Merlin had thrown Frakir to Moradin, it could only mean that the situation was so desperate that Merlin actually doubted his own ability to survive. From something Lance had said, I gathered that Frakir was some sort of Chaos entity, who shared some kind of symbiotic relationship with Merlin. He wouldn't have wanted something like that to fall into Brand's clutches.

A quick glance at my companions showed me that they were thinking along much the same lines. As far as anyone could tell from what little we had seen of the fire, it looked as if most of our relatives were being held there, powerless to escape. So far as we could tell, though, everyone was still alive. Wasn't that what the hot Trumps were telling us? I thought so....

I don't remember who posed the question, but Moradin assured us that, certainly, Merlin had been very much alive when he'd seen him last. The others favored each other with telling glances. I could almost see the wheels turning. I tried to take my cue from Harlan, but he was fooling with the Trumps, as usual, head down.

This was beginning to become a game I was playing with myself, and to some extent with the others. They seemed to have trouble accepting that I was Bronwyn...well, I guess I can't blame them for that...but I kept getting the feeling that they didn't trust me in this unfamiliar form, and there wasn't much I could do to demonstrate that I was really me. I kept watching Harlan, copying what he was doing and hoping that they'd all ignore me, figuring that I was him. He caught me at it once or twice, and kept giving me weird looks. Whenever he'd see that I'd noticed, he'd look away again, quickly. I had a feeling that this was why he was keeping such a firm hand on the Trump deck. Which is the *real* Harlan? Well, the one with the Trumps, of course.

Moradin was droning on and on about the fire, and how awful everything was. I could relate to this. Then he began to tell some strange story about a journey, and a place he called Candyland. It was really bizarre and totally unbelievable, but they say you can find

any place you want, out in Shadow.... I couldn't for the life of me figure out why he'd want to find *that* place, however. From what I could understand of his tale, the place rained human waste. Ick. Apparently he had arrived back in Amber via the kitchen table again, and I practically despaired of ever getting another decently cooked meal in Castle Amber. The kitchen staff would up and quit en masse over this one, unless I missed my guess. I know servants, and this would probably do it....

While I turned my mind to trivialities, Godfrey and Kayen put their heads together and came up with an alternate plan for punching through to Brand's place for their invasion. They decided to use Merlin's Trump, and all of them would concentrate at once. I think they had some vague idea about rescuing Merlin when they got there, but I didn't have much hope for that. Still, no one was asking my opinion, and though I tried to interrupt them once or twice, of course nobody would listen.

Actually, I rather feared the plan would work all too well. At least, that much concentrated power would be sure to draw Brand's attention. I was reasonably certain that he would draw them through, much in the same way he'd gathered us all up before. My cousins would wind up at their objective, but maybe not in the way they'd expected.

At this point, Big Sword got a Trump call of his own. We all tensed, and I got ready to run. But it turned out to be his buddy, back from Shadow with half a dozen Dickey suits over his arm. Enthusiastically, they drew him into their plans.

Everybody seemed agreeable to the strategy proposed...even Eleanor, whom I had privately figured for a flat refusal. Again, she just didn't seem to want to be left alone. My qualms were of a different nature. I had noticed an appalling lack of planning about what we were going to do once we got inside.

Oh, well. If I was going to be part of this dog and pony show, it occurred to me to get one of the flame resistant suits for myself before the others scarfed them up. If I'd had trouble with the fire as Bronwyn, this body was bound to go up like a torch.

I struggled into one of the suits, and noticed that Eleanor was doing the same. Then I handed one to Harlan, who accepted it without comment and began to put it on. The rest of the suits lay in a heap on the sofa, where the strange new guy had left them. No one was paying any attention to us, as usual. They were all concentrating on Merlin's Trump. I wondered if they thought Brand was going to give them time to dress.

That's when the floor erupted in a smoky belch, and a huge black pit opened in the middle of the room. Everyone jumped back away from the maw except Moradin, who stood tottering at the brink as a

flaming figure rose from the depths. I think someone screamed. It was either me or Eleanor.

The burning form raised its arms and roared in triumph as it rose, suspended on nothing but smoke, that I could see. I back-pedaled as fast as I could on unfamiliar feet, while everyone else jockeyed for defensive positions around the pit, drawing swords and axes and all manner of sharp, shiny weapons. Somehow, I got the feeling they weren't going to be much use.

Incredibly, Moradin still stood at the edge of the hole, squinting up at the monster through the smoke. This was when I *knew* he must be mad.

"Merlinnnn, is that youuuu?" he whined, as the fiery creature swung an arm outward to sweep my cousins into the pit.

The question seemed to startle the thing. The guys danced out of the way, making defensive swipes with their weapons, which seemed to do no harm.

Merlin, or whatever it was, paused and looked at Moradin. A bass rumble of laughter erupted from the flames.

"Yessss." A sibilant hiss in the crackle of flames.

We waited to see what the madman would do next.

"You've got to take your thing back now. I don't want it.... It gives me the creeps...."

Incredibly, Moradin was pulling an invisible something from his wrist, arm raised, poised to throw.

"Nooooo!" I screamed, and heard the echo of the others in my ears, as Moradin pelted something at the figure in the flames.

Merlin caught Frakir, and slapped it about his wrist in a shower of sparks and a howl of laughter.

"THANKS!" he roared.

I cringed as his form began to grow, recognizable now, and yet all the more terrible for that fact. Again he swept an arm out to level his attackers, and although none were knocked into the flames, we were not so lucky this time. There was some generalized singeing of hair and eyebrows, and someone I couldn't see through the smoke was forced to drop his weapon and beat out the flames licking about his cloak.

Only Kayen's axe, which seemed to have snatches of the Pattern on its blade, seemed to keep Merlin away from the group. But Kayen couldn't be everywhere, and Merlin's reach seemed to be awfully long.

Then Godfrey pulled a cross from his belt and held it in front of him, Van Helsing style, veins of his forehead and neck standing out with the strain as he poured all his energy into the effort of holding Merlin at bay. Merlin lunged in a shower of sparks, then pulled back abruptly as he met the power Godfrey was focusing. A moment only,

and then he lunged again!

Godfrey was driven back a step by the force of the attack. His arm wavered, but somehow he held on.

They stood eye to eye for a couple of seconds, with the power crackling between them with a force that was almost palpable. Then Godfrey fell back slightly... only a couple of inches, but Merlin pressed his advantage, driving some force of his own against that of the cross.

Godfrey struggled, brows furrowed in concentration, but Merlin was laughing now, and for a moment I thought that all was lost.

"Harlan! Help me!" Godfrey shouted. "I need a psychic boost!"

Harlan tried to take a step forward, and almost tripped over the legs of the suit he'd been donning when all of the trouble broke out. I figured he wouldn't be going anywhere in much of a hurry, so I murmured, "I'll get it," and stepped forward into the fray.

I clapped a hand on Godfrey's shoulder and tried to channel my own psychic power through him, but I couldn't! The power was there, but I couldn't get it out. It was blocked up solid by this dumb body I had snatched, and I couldn't get through.

This was almost as bad as no Pattern. But I didn't have time to bemoan it, because Merlin was pushing, and both Godfrey and I were driven back a step with the force.

"Harlan!" Godfrey shot a wild glance in my direction, and I just shook my head, as bewildered as he was.

Then, out of nowhere or someplace beyond, came a wild surge of energy I didn't recognize, strong enough to feel through my current lump of flesh. It surged and crackled through Godfrey as if it were possessed by a will of its own. Startled, I stood there with my hand still on his shoulder, unable to move as the power built in a startling crescendo, focused on the cross and through it, into Merlin.

There was a split second of desperate struggle between Merlin and the power that was surging through the cross at an unbelievable rate. Suddenly, the cross exploded into a million shards that went flying in every direction. Godfrey fell back with a gasp, as I dropped my hand to my side and Merlin slumped, whole and unharmed and normal-looking, at our feet on the floor of the study where the hole used to be.

The others had been frozen in their places...except for Harlan, who was still struggling out of his suit. Now everyone converged on the center of the room, and they rolled Merlin onto his back, checking for signs of life. He was unconscious.

Godfrey was looking from Harlan to me with a puzzled expression, and I thought I could guess what he was thinking, so I told him. "It's me, Bronwyn. What happened?"

He didn't understand.

"You overloaded it. Did you have to do that?"

I shook my head, and opened my mouth to tell him it wasn't me. But he had already turned away and was looking at Merlin, who was groaning a bit as he came to his sense on the floor.

Harlan came up, and I tried to tell him too. But he only shrugged, and turned his attention to Merlin as the others had.

I shrugged too. Something strange was going on, but I couldn't begin to guess what it might be. In my present state, I was pretty sure I wouldn't have much chance of doing so.

I confess, I was disappointed. At least, our previous folly had been action of a sort. I was getting that creepy feeling again. That I had better get back to my body fast, if I was going to get back at all.

Merlin was regaining consciousness at a rapid rate of speed. He looked lousy, but he was entitled to it, I figured. Kayen was rapid-firing questions of a strategic nature, so it seemed that the invasion was still on. I couldn't think how they meant to accomplish it, though. We were back to square one.

Godfrey kept shooting dubious glances in my direction, muttering stuff too low for me to hear. His hand had been cut up a bit from the exploding cross, and he looked pretty unhappy. I decided to leave him alone for a while. If he wanted to think I still had the power to blast something with a psychic attack, I wasn't going to correct him. If they all thought I had that kind of power left, maybe they'd be more willing to include me in whatever they were planning.

I turned my attention to Merlin. He and Moradin were pretty beat from their experiences, and someone suggested that they go to their rooms and lie down for a bit. No arguments. They went.

We were back to cooling our heels again, but the battle fever was running high. The fighter-types had had enough, and were itching to go bash something. I didn't blame them. I wanted to bash something myself...Brand. Unfortunately, I'm not too good at bashing.

I decided to give it a try, though. So I took one of the swords down off the wall and took a few practice swipes with it, to see if this body was any more skilled in the arts of war than my own was.

Most of the swords that hand on the walls of the Castle are decorative...to an extent...although most have seen action at one time or another. The one I had chosen was almost as tall as I am (when I am myself) and both its edges were equally sharp. Don't tell my father, but I haven't any idea what kind of sword it was. Apparently, my new body wasn't very familiar with it either. I knocked over a vase full of flowers and a bronze bust of Oberon, before one of the two guys I didn't know came over, took it away from me, and hung it back on the wall.

I heard Harlan behind me, laughing, but I refused to give him the satisfaction of acknowledging this.

Then Kayen got a Trump call. He held it off for a few moments, while those who were capable ranged themselves around him, weapons drawn. Then he let it come through.

He relaxed visibly, and I heard him murmur, "Oh, Kel. What is it?"

For a few moments, the conversation went back and forth in low tones I couldn't hear. They seemed to be arguing about something. I could hear him asking her to come through, but she wasn't having any. Finally, she must have won, because he explained quickly to the rest of us that he was going through to her...alone.

No way. Before they could transfer and shut down the contact, one of the others grabbed Kayen by the shoulders and followed him through. Then he brought the rest of us along.

Even before I had a chance to get my bearings I was distracted by Kelcey, who erupted into a stream of invective at Kayen, apparently because he had brought the rest of us to accompany him.

"Fuck!" she screamed, and, "Oh, shit!" She has a mouth on her, does our Kelcey.

I figured she'd been hanging around her father's soldiers a little too long.

"What do you mean by bringing *them* here?" she shouted at Kayen. "I told you I wanted to talk to you alone. When they're all together, we never get *anything* done!"

She emphasized her point by beating on Kayen's breastplate, a little above his waist, which is about as high as she can reach unless he's sitting down. She was drumming him with both fists, having a wild old time, momentarily forgetting she always likes to look like she's made of sugar and spice and etc.

He didn't seem very impressed by this, maybe a little embarrassed, but I suppose he must be used to it. He just said, "Ah, Kel...," and waited for her to subside.

Just when it looked like she was running out of steam, she noticed me and Harlan who had come through last, and went off into another fit.

"Oh, no!" she screamed. *"There's two of them! This is just too fucking weird!"*

Harlan winked at me. I winked back. There's nothing I love better than freaking Kelcey, unless it's walking Pattern.

"Look, I just remembered something, I've got to leave. I've got something to do." She took two steps away from Kayen, but he reached out his arm and reeled her back in.

"Calm down!" he yelled, in his best military manner. "Just

CALM DOWN!"

She stopped squirming and glared at him. I hid a laugh behind a hand.

"It's all right, Kel," he went on, once he had her attention. "One of them is really Bronwyn."

"Oh my God!" she shrieked. "That's worse! This is just too weird!"

I would have enjoyed this a lot more if everything else hadn't been so awful. Maybe another time....

He drew her a little away from the rest of us, and began arguing with her in low tones. I took advantage of the break to look around me.

We were in a slightly wooded dell or valley. In the center of the scene was a small clearing, in which a huge tree was growing. My mind flashed back to something Lance had said to me the other night.

"Is that Ygg?" I asked Harlan.

"Dunno," he shrugged. "I don't think so, but...." He broke off, shuffling through his Trumps. I decided to try for a second opinion, and looked around for Godfrey.

He was searching the glade, looking in tree stumps and under fallen branches, muttering to himself. The more he searched, the more he muttered, and the madder he got.

"It's got to be around here someplace...."

"What are you looking for?" I asked him.

"My cross!" he snarled. "It should be around her someplace!"

"Here? I thought it blew up, back in Amber...."

He looked at me then, and I guess he realized who he was looking at.

"Because it's an ARTIFACT!" he snarled, teeth clenched in frustration. "I should ALWAYS be ABLE to find ANOTHER!"

"Oh," I said brightly, and drifted away again.

I don't know much from artifacts. I never lose my bracelets. Just my body....

I decided *not* to ask him about Ygg....

Kayen and Kelcey had apparently ironed out their differences, or at least they had come to a momentary truce. He drew her back down to the tree, where some of the others were gathered about, trying to talk to it. The tree was not responding. I guessed I wasn't the only one who had remembered Lance's conversation with it.

Kayen still had Kelcey by the arm. Now he shook her slightly. "Tell them."

She took a deep breath. "All right.... I just escaped from Brand, and I know where...."

"Is this Ygg?" someone interrupted. (Not me.)

"No. I...."

"Maybe we should find Ygg. Didn't Lance say he could see the great fire from Ygg?" Godfrey asked.

"I know where...." Kelcey began again. But it was no use. They jumped on the new idea with enthusiasm.

"Does anybody have a Trump for Ygg?" someone asked.

"Yeah, that's a great idea!"

"I do!" From Harlan, I think.

"Will you *please* listen to me?!" Kelcey wailed.

"Come on! Let's go to Ygg! We can walk from there...."

Kelcey rounded on Kayen, in a temper. "See!" she shouted. "I told you!"

He shrugged. Everyone had joined hands and was marching through the Trump contact. I followed, because there wasn't much else I could do. Kayen brought up the rear, dragging a reluctant Kelcey. She looked mad enough to bite his hand.

So this was the famous Ygg. Didn't look much different from the other tree....

"Hello," I said tentatively. No answer. So I'm *not* as charming as Lance.

In keeping with my cousin's tale, I could see a huge pall of smoke hanging over the horizon. It looked a long way off. Maybe we *could* walk it, but it was going to take some time.

It occurred to me that time was running out...at least, it was for me. With the group around me, we would stick out like a sore thumb in the sere landscape between Ygg and the fire, and I was certain that Brand would have a nice little welcome prepared for us. But if I could *fly* to it....

Now, I have never flown without a hang-glider. But I was still under the impression that my consciousness was on some sort of astral journey away from my body, and I figured that if I could get out of the fake Harlan, I could project myself back to where my body was and sneak in unobtrusively, in "spirit" form. Right!

I looked around me. The others (except for Kelcey, who was sulking) were all watching Eleanor, who seemed to be having some luck with Ygg. At any rate, no one was paying any attention to me at all. Fine. First I sat down on the ground, so as not to draw any attention to what I was doing. I didn't want anyone trying to stop me. Then, slowly, carefully, I began to withdraw my consciousness from the Harlan analog.

When I was completely out, the Harlan body slumped forward without a sound. No one noticed. I began my journey....

What a mistake! I could have walked faster than I could move this way. It took all of my will to move my consciousness away from the glade at all, let alone project myself all the way to Brand....

I decided to go back. It just wasn't worth the effort. Now I was not only helpless, but preoccupied with this feeling that *nothing* I was doing was of any use at all. It was very discouraging. I blamed my lack of concentration for the long, difficult time I had, re-inhabiting the Harlan body. The effort left me limp with exhaustion and...fear....

No one had even noticed I was gone. I sat with my hands on my knees and my chin in my hands, watching the others making fools out of themselves trying to get Ygg's attention. He had apparently stopped talking to anyone. Period.

Eleanor was rather jubilant about her ability, however fleeting, to talk to the tree. I never did learn what it told her. At the moment I was too depressed to care, but she was having a good time telling the group about it. Suddenly, she gasped and went very, very still....

"Oh my God, what is this? What's happening?"

There was a familiar ripple effect before her.

"Trump call," Harlan murmured, and everybody took their places.

Eleanor was obviously not too happy about this, and tried to fight it off, but whoever was calling her was a lot stronger than she was, psychically, and managed to punch through despite her resistance. Her defenses collapsed, and the call came through.

From where I was sitting, I couldn't see what she was seeing, and I was not in the mood to get up and investigate. Then, I heard Moradin's now familiar whine.

"Eleanorrrrr, help meeeee."

She started to say something, then broke off with a shriek, trying to back out of the way. With that, a fiery arm reached out of the ripple and made a grab for her.

He missed. My relief was short-lived, however, as Brand recovered and found another target. He grabbed Harlan, who was standing nearby, and yanked him through the hole before anyone could react to prevent it. Harlan struggled momentarily, then went limp. Brand reeled him in with ease.

My cousins erupted into a flurry of action! Damien pulled Eleanor out of the way, and Kayen made a furious swipe at Brand's arm with his Pattern axe, missing by inches.

Somehow, I was on my feet and moving, in a simultaneous effort to see what was going on, and at the same time stay out of the reach of that arm. I saw Moradin, sitting in his bed in Amber, with a tray of bacon and eggs in his lap. Above him loomed the flaming figure of Brand, and he was laughing.

"Another time, Eleanor," Brand called, and disappeared with Harlan in tow.

"Eleanorrrr...." Moradin began.

In a fluid motion born of desperation, Eleanor dove through the contact and fastened her hands around Moradin's throat. In a death grip, she throttled him, shaking him like a mongoose shakes a snake, doing a good job of it, too. I don't know where she found the strength. I really thought she would kill him then, and anxious to preserve what few of our number we had left, I called out the only thing I could think of that might distract one of the Great Unwashed: "Eleanor! You're kneeling in his breakfast. You're ruining the *food*!"

"I don't care!" she yelled back. "I'm going to kill him!"

My shout had galvanized the others, who poured through the contact and ranged themselves around the bed. Someone pulled Eleanor off Moradin, who was beginning to turn an interesting shade of purple. His eyes were bulging.

Eleanor struggled in her captor's hold, snarling maledictions and curses. Moradin gasped for breath, rubbing his throat. He tried to whine some excuse, but his voice was no more than a rasping croak.

She shook away restraining hands, and I thought she would surely attack again. But she merely shook a fist at him, and shouted, "Moradin, if you EVER call me again, I swear I'll kill you. Do you understand! I'M GOING TO KILL YOU!"

He still couldn't talk, but he nodded his head, vigorously. It must have been painful....

I was still standing on the other side of the contact, watching as the others went through to Moradin's bedchamber. A curious lassitude had stolen over me. I didn't want to be back in Amber. I wanted to go back to my body. I couldn't take another spell of sitting in the study while everybody talked. It occurred to me that, if we were ever going to invade Brand's stronghold, then certainly the time was now. With him prowling around the Castle, we'd have a better chance of getting into his fiery pit and maybe doing some damage. Even he couldn't be in two places at once. Maybe we could even rescue somebody. Me, for instance.

I felt really bad about Harlan. Personal feelings aside, losing him had left our group a little psyche-short. With him missing and me psyche-blocked to boot, we were really in the soup. The rest are all big macho warrior types, it's true, but let's face it, mental giants they're not....

I *had* to get back to my body!

The contact wavered and shifted before me. Godfrey turned back once, and held out his hand. It was go, or stay here alone and helpless. I took Godfrey's hand....

I thought I was going to die. Right then and there. As I stepped

through the contact, my sense of disorientation and displacement heightened to unbearable limits, and I felt all of my senses and life-force flooding away from my body. My stream of consciousness seemed to spin out and dissipate into the air around me, and it took all of my will to gather it back and force myself to hold it together. My knees buckled, and I slumped on Moradin's bed in a heap.

The others looked at me oddly, but no one commented. They were intent on hearing Moradin's tale, force out between rasping breaths and a little more sensible and coherent, or so it seemed, than usual. I don't know for sure. I wasn't paying strict attention. I couldn't.

Midway through his story, it became apparent to all that if Moradin had been visited by Brand, who was apparently trying to offer him some kind of deal for his allegiance, then it was possible that Merlin, too, had been approached. Kayen and the two unknowns made a dash for the door to check on him, but when it opened, the hall was full of demons. Of course, they attacked. The fight was brief and desperate, but Brand had neglected to empower his minions with the ability to withstand Pattern weapons. The others had followed Kayen and company into the fray, except for Kelcey and Eleanor, who had gone as far as the door to watch. I dragged myself off the bed and stumbled behind them.

A brief check of Merlin's room revealed the worst of our fears to be true. He was gone. No trace. There could only be one explanation.

"What do we do now?" Eleanor asked.

Kelcey looked grim. "We follow," she said shortly.

I had made it as far as the door, and was leaning against the jamb. What little strength I'd had in the Harlan body was just about spent, and I had no illusions about helping.

"You go on," I told them. "I'll catch up later...."

Kelcey was staring at me.

"What's the matter with you?" she asked. "Besides the fact that you look just like that freak?"

"I think I'm dying," I told her honestly. "I keep getting weaker, and I know that I'm running out of time. If I can't get back to my own body...." I let it trail off, unwilling to face the inevitable.

She shot me a look that was cold and calculating, without a trace of sympathy to soften her words.

"Two Harlans are more than I can stand," she said, voice flat and unemotional. "I think I liked you better the other way."

I refrained from pointing out that, for all intents and purposes, there *was* only one Harlan around now. But I thought it was a bit shabby of her to be so critical of someone who had been helping us all the time, and had ended up as Brand's prisoner for his efforts.

She sounded as though she thought it was a poor choice in any case, and I shrugged. Her opinion of me was the least of my worries.

"I'll help you find your body!" Eleanor offered.

I was shocked. "How?" I asked. "Brand's place is a long way from Amber, and I don't know if I can take the walk, even with you shifting Shadow for me...."

"Let's try your Trump," she suggested. She shuffled through her deck and dealt it out, frowning in concentration. Nothing.

I was feeling too weak to be any more discouraged by this than I already felt. Somehow I managed a grin. "Well, it looks like Shank's Mare after all." I turned away. "You don't have to come...."

Kelcey had been watching this exchange, arms folded across her chest, with a speculative look in her eye. Now she stirred.

"Two Harlans are more than I can stand," she repeated as I moved away.

Her attitude was really getting to me. I just kept moving, while I had the strength.

"Bronwyn...."

This caught me up short, and I whirled around. I was no match for her now, I knew, but I saw no reason to take any more of her insults....

She had a dagger in her hand. I thought she was going to offer me the coup de grace. I wondered if I would have the guts to take it....

Instead, she turned the dagger in her palm and drew it across her other wrist, watching calmly as the blood welled up from the wound. After a bit she nodded, as though satisfied, and closed the wound with some power that I was too weary to wonder about then. She dipped her fingers into the blood, and cast her hand to the air. Something sprung from her fingertips and hung there, shining between us.

"This is a creature of my desire," she began in a voice so low I had to strain to hear her. "It will lead you to Brand's fortress, and maybe to your body. I tried to tell you all before, but of course you were too busy arguing to listen. I *know* where Brand's stronghold is. I could have led you...." She shrugged, and her voice trailed away into a silence that hung between us like the creature of her desire.

It was the longest speech I had ever heard her make.

"Why are you doing this?" I asked.

She ignored the question.

"You'd better get going. I have a funny feeling that we're not all that far away from where you need to go, anyhow, but I'm not going to stick around to find out."

"Where are you going?" Eleanor asked.

"I have...to go away for awhile. I've got to find Kayen and get to a...place... where I think Brand will be heading next. GO."

She turned away, and headed down the passage in the direction

in which my cousins had disappeared.

I called out once again. "Why, Kelcey?"

"Because two Harlans...." Then she broke into a run and was gone around the bend in the hall, and the rest of her answer trailed off into nothing.

I took a deep breath and looked at Eleanor, who was staring after Kelcey. She shook herself, looked up, and met my eyes.

"Well...." she said.

"You don't have...."

"I'm coming," she stated. "You may need help."

I wasn't sure what help she would be, but I was glad of her company. I tried to tell her, but she shrugged it off. As we started down the stairs, following Kelcey's creature, she explained very simply. "I spent...I don't *know* how long, enslaved by that monster! If I can help anyone get away from him, I will."

I murmured something noncommittal. I was getting that feeling again.

She went on as if I hadn't interrupted. "It was always burning hot or freezing cold. There was never enough food, barely enough to keep us alive. My clearest memory is of pain...."

I stopped to lean against the wall and rest. My knees were weak and shaky. We kept descending, led by Kelcey's creature. Eleanor stopped and looked back at me, and I heaved myself away from the wall with effort and spoke to cover my weakness. "Eleanor, if we get out of this alive, you come and stay with me for awhile. I promise you'll be comfortable, and I have the best cooks in Shadow...."

The weight of my fire-resistant suit was wearing me down. I longed to remove it, but I didn't think I had the strength, and was afraid this body would never withstand the flames without its protection. We kept going down. The stairway became a telescoping depth on which I didn't dare to concentrate. I kept my eyes on Kelcey's creature. The temperature was increasing.

On one of the nether landings we stopped for rest and breath. The heat was almost unbearable. The body I was wearing was just about spent.

"How...far down...do you think...we've come?" Eleanor panted.

"Almost...as far...down as the...Pattern Room...." I hardly had the breath to answer. There were spots in front of my eyes.

The creature waited patiently, floating a little ahead. I felt a sense of urgency from it...or what? We continued.

Another hundred steps or so, and to the right there was a door that shouldn't be there...according to my memory, at least. The heat was intense now. I put my hand on the door, and it was worse. In wordless agreement we shouldered it together, and, with some resistance, it gave eventually. We fell through into an inferno!

As I picked myself up, first to my knees, then to my feet and shambled forward, I knew that the suit was no protection from the flames. Already I could smell singed flesh within my air space, and the pain defied description. I could only stumble after Eleanor, who led the way, affected somewhat by the heat, it seemed, but certainly not to the extent that I was.

When I thought that I could go no more, Eleanor made a sound beside me and pointed straight ahead. Through the smoke and fire I could see an oval in the distance, and a dim figure standing within it. I dragged myself a little closer and I realized that, finally, it was my body that I saw.

I marshalled what little strength was left into a loping run straight toward my target. Dimly, I heard Eleanor shouting something about a barrier, but my eyes were failing too badly to see what she was talking about. I slammed the Harlan body into a wall of force or something that dissolved beneath my touch, while at the same time spinning me away onto my hands and knees in the fire.

In the edges of my rapidly darkening vision, I saw the body that should be mine turn, open its eyes. Hands outstretched, it advanced. As it touched, the Harlan body exploded in a gout of flame.

I should be dead.

For an instant, that which was my spirit fragmented, flying out and away...I can't describe it! I was gone.

No! Life! Not flame, but comfort. Not horror, safety. Something was holding me, and I was alive. Who or what, I didn't know, and wondered that I had the wits left to think about it. There was a sense of familiarity, almost like a homecoming. But I couldn't recognize the source, although I had the feeling that I should....

Before I had time to probe, if such was possible in the state I was in, I had a sense of motion or change, and then, well, then I was *really* home.

I stretched my hands before my face. *My hands!* My rings glittered in the firelight! My arms. I ran my fingers through *my* hair. Laughing!

When I looked, Eleanor was staring at me, disbelief etched across her face. I waved.

"It's me!" I shouted. "IT'S ME!"

I darted away from the circle, caught her arm and whirled her around in a mad dance of triumph, oblivious to the heat, which was still intense, and the flames, which were fanned to even greater heights by my skirts and our movement. The flames were nothing! They hadn't burned me before...not really...it was my fear that had given them power! I realized that now.

"C'mon," I said. "Let's get out of here."

"Where?" she asked.

"The Pattern Room! It's got to be nearby. From there we can go wherever we want...." I pulled her forward, back the way we'd come....

She hung back, and I wondered why, but I wasn't in the mood to ask. I yanked her arm again....

"OHO, WHAT HAVE WE HERE?"

A voice, familiar and alien at once, cut through my jubilation like a hot knife through butter! I spun, dread to look and yet driven to see the worst.

It wasn't Brand who floated toward me. Eleanor made a strange little sound like a moan beside me. I was still holding her arm. Deliberately, I pushed her behind me.

"Get ready to run!" I hissed. "Or get ready to Trump us out of here...."

Merlin in flames! He floated towards me, buoyed on I-don't-know-what, a few feet above the fire. Through the fiery facade, I could see his features twisted in a grimace of unholy glee. I thought of the Logrus and Frakir and the powers that he commanded, and my mouth went dry....

I tried to call the Pattern up before me. It seemed natural, back in my own body. No go.

"COME, BROTHER. HERE IS OUR PREY. SHALL WE HAVE SOME SPORT RUNNING IT DOWN?"

My horror took a quantum leap, as another figure detached itself from the gloom and floated towards us, like Merlin, all aflame.

Oh Lords, not Lance!

But it was. His eyes were empty of everything but malice. Wildly, I fought for control. Tried not to panic.

'*Now*, we die,' I thought, fighting despair.

Behind me, Eleanor was fumbling through her Trumps. I hoped she could raise someone, *anyone*, in time.

'Whatever, whoever you are, who's been looking out for me...don't fail me now!' I prayed or begged...for I knew, now, that *something* had been. There was no flickering sense of power....

Horribly, the two fiery figures began to close....

They drew towards us, and that which was Merlin veered off and went around me. I tried to back towards Eleanor, but Merlin was too fast. In front of me I heard Lance chuckle, punctuated by the crackle of flame. I whirled back towards him, still backing away. Then, something inside me snapped, and I lost my temper...who the devil did he think he was, anyway?!

Lance! I could take Lance with one hand tied behind my back! He was a wuss! Just let him try it! Why, I'd fry his brain to jelly!

I caught up short and took a couple of steps forward. Toe to toe

and nose to nose, I thought I caught a flicker of uncertainty in those eyes, so I pressed my advantage and shoved one hand flat against his flickering torso.

And nearly fainted from the burning pain!

Somehow, I managed to damp it down, telling myself the fire was illusion and hadn't really hurt me before. Mentally I was wide open, I guess, because suddenly the Lance-thing moved backward, as though trying to break the contact. Grimly, I followed, pushing a little.

'You're nothing but a jerk, Lance,' I told him with my mind. 'You're a weakling and a coward, and you can't do anything right! Look at the mess you're making of this. You can't take me!'

He back-pedaled, floating a few inches from whatever passed for the floor in this place, and I chuckled suddenly, because I realized I was beating him. He gave more ground, but I stayed in his space, pushing a little. It was fun!

Just when I was beginning to enjoy myself, he swooped away from me, incredibly fast. My psychic link was broken, and I saw the flickering eye-sockets narrow as he regained control. The figure began to twist and writhe, smoke pouring out of the two portions that were fighting to separate. It was weird and scary!

"You're right!" the crackling voice rumbled. *"I shall excise the weakling that is inside of me!"*

The figure twisted, squeezing out...something....

Now, I didn't like the looks of this one bit. The best I had done was buy myself some time. Behind me, I could no longer hear Eleanor struggling with Merlin. I hoped she had gotten away, but there was no way to tell. They both were gone.

I dug in my pocket, hoping my Trumps were still where I had left them before I fell into the fire.

My hand closed on the deck, and I yanked out the top card, concentrating on making a contact even before I knew who I was calling.

Well, there was no way you could tell if a card was hot or cold in that place!

I found myself looking at a Lance who flickered back and forth between the picture on his Trump and the fiery form before me. The mitosis was just about complete. I caught something from his mind...the *real* Lance, I mean. Desperation, and something worse. Purely on impulse, I took an awful chance. I reached out and caught the essence that was my cousin, and thrust it into the Trump.

Both of the Lances shrieked at once, one in relief and one in triumph! I glanced at the flaming apparition that no longer held the shred of doubt and decency that was my cousin. There was nothing

left to which I could appeal.

Oh brother, I thought, I'm going to have to kill him now, it's him or me!

I ignored the howl of protest from the Trump I still held in my hand. With deliberate malice, my adversary moved towards me now, a fiery cat toying with a mouse. Frantically, I reached out for the presence I had sensed before. The mysterious something that had helped me get back to my body....

There was no answering rush of comfort and assistance. But somewhere, beyond my mental grasp, I caught a sense of...something else....

I reached out and drew it towards me!

An overwhelming sense of power rushed me and threatened to sweep my very consciousness away with it. But somehow, I managed some control. It was almost too much for me to handle, and I had to get rid of some of it, at least, or it would take control of *me*. I cast it forward at the figure, a long stream of fiery energy that struck him square in the chest, reeling him backward and dissipating around him.

Looked like I was trying to fight fire with fire. He seemed unharmed.

Unharmed, but really surprised!

Giddy with power, I moved forward, ignoring the fact that I hadn't really hurt him at all. I was really angry.

Something that was part of me, yet wasn't, began shouting in rage and triumph. "Better run, bully, before I hit you with my big stuff! I'm Bronwyn of Amber. You can't hurt me!"

The figure retreated, and I followed, drunk with the power. I felt fire and lightning crackling around me, and energy that I could barely control pouring into my body and mind. The Lance-thing swept away from me quickly, hovering well out of my reach.

"Brand must hear of this!" it hissed, and the eerie voice sounded a bit uncertain to my ears. Then it vanished, and I was alone.

I down-loaded the power to a manageable level, with more control than I knew I had. I tried to figure out what had happened. As far as I could tell, I had managed to tap whatever energy it was that held this place together and use it for my own. Carefully, I probed to see if I could tell what kind of power I was using. The answer threatened to destroy my shaky control.

Weak-kneed, I realized that somehow, I had managed to tap the raw power that was...the Abyss!

I almost lost it again.

I calmed myself, with effort. So, this was the Abyss. Well, it wasn't Pattern, but it would do in a pinch. I probed to see how it was different, and the very alien-ness of the thing gave me a creepy

feeling that I shut down very quickly, before it could undermine my control.

I experimented. I powered it up. I damped it down. I pushed myself through sets of mental exercises I hadn't used since the first few times I'd tried to mold the Pattern's energy to my desire. I don't know just how long I stood playing around with all of this, but time meant nothing to me here. So I made sure that I would be good and familiar with what I was doing, before I had to use the stuff again.

Bronwyn's the name. Energy's the game. I felt wonderful! Let me tell you, Abyss is heady stuff....

Reality snapped in with a little voice that said hesitantly, "Uh...Bronwyn, what are you doing? Is it gone?"

It was Lance, from inside the Trump.

"It's gone, Lance," I told him. "Don't bother me now, I'm busy...."

"Well, I can see that!" he commented. "What are you doing?"

I had forgotten he was still in contact, via the Trump. I had never shut it down. I moved the Trump to eye level, and studied it. Good old familiar Lance! He had never done me any harm. That other thing wasn't really him.

"Are you O.K.?" I asked him, somewhat after the fact.

"Uh, not really," he said. "Can you get my body back for me? I seem to be stuck here, in the Trump."

Hmmm, he was right! I wasn't just in contact with him by Trump. He *was* the Trump. Standing there in the pose and the clothes he'd been wearing when painted, he looked at me hopefully...and, I thought, with just a bit of wariness. I guess that didn't surprise me all that much. He had just watched me take on all of his baser instincts, and *win*. I must have seemed pretty creepy at that point. He was being awfully polite.

"Well...I'll try," I told him, not willing to promise too much. I had a feeling that the fiery thing I had driven off *was* his body, and I wasn't willing to put *that* back together again.

I concentrated on using the Power to pull him out of the Trump again. It wasn't a complete success. Oh, he came out all right. A wispy, feathery thing of smoke, with a few little flames flickering about the edges. He began to dissipate rapidly, unable to hold a cohesive form without whatever binder Brand had put upon him.

"Help me!" he shrieked, panicked.

Quickly, I reached out with my new energy and gathered him, thrusting him back into the Trump. The thing was unwieldy, and I still wasn't that used to dealing with it. I guess I wasn't too gentle. The image on the Trump staggered a bit, regained its balance, and then wiped a hand across its brow in relief.

"Lance," I told him, "you're a Shadow of your former self. You're

going to have to stay in there until I can figure out how to get your body back from Brand."

He glared at me, then laughed. Lance always could see the humor in a situation. Then he asked, "Can you do it, though? What are you using for power? It doesn't feel like Pattern to me."

"It isn't."

He looked at me, eyebrows raised, as if to say, "Go on...." So I told him.

I don't think he believed me.

"Look, I have to keep moving," I told him. "I'm getting out of here. If Brand comes back, I don't want to be anywhere *near* this place...."

I made a light with Abyss power, easy because my control was improving by leaps and bounds. Then I picked a direction and began walking in it.

This went on for quite some time, I think. There was no way to tell for sure. Lance kept up a steady stream of chatter and protest. He didn't want to leave the general area where he believed his body to be. I couldn't say I blamed him, but it was beginning to be annoying. Finally, I put him away in my pocket. His protests were copious, but muffled. After awhile he shut up.

Mean? Maybe. I couldn't afford to let my awareness slip for one moment. I could feel the power coursing through me, and I knew I had to remain in control. Besides, Brand or Merlin or the other half of Lance could come swooping down on me at any time. It was going to be hard enough to fight them, without Lance going to pieces in the Trump. I figured what he didn't see wouldn't hurt him...much.

After what seemed like a long time I got tired of walking, which is always a bore without scenery to look at or something else to pass the time. I could have been walking in circles for all I knew, because there was no way to tell directions in that place. I began to wonder if I could use Abyss Power to get myself back to Amber, the way I use Pattern (when I have it).

There was nothing to walk in my mind, or otherwise. So I just pulled the Power into focus, pictured myself at the gates of Amber, and wished with all my might. Perhaps I did something wrong....

Suddenly, I was standing at the edge of the Abyss, my feet crumbling little chunks of soil back into the pit. For a few seconds I fought for purchase on the edge, in danger of falling backwards. Then I regained my balance, and threw myself away from the edge.

Scratch that idea!

I could still feel the stuff around me, not quite as strong as before, but almost. I was going to have to do this the hard way. If my mental geography was correct, I was somewhere in the depths of Chaos, which isn't exactly my idea of a vacation paradise. Looked

like I was in for a walk, after all. Oh well.

I tried a few experimental shifts (yes, I do know how, I just don't like it) and the sky became a little less nauseating. It seemed like a good start. Unfortunately, the farther I walked from the Abyss, the weaker my hold on its energy became. Darn!

That doesn't happen with Pattern!

I was going to have to go back. Darn!

I plodded back to the edge and sat down, dangling my legs over the rim, trying to figure out what to do. Here, the Power seemed almost as before. Away from here, I grew increasingly less formidable. And it was the only edge I had.

No Pattern. No Abyss. Oh, shoot! If Brand caught up with me, there'd be no Bronwyn! No way!

I took a deep breath and plunged myself back to where I'd been before, ignoring the shriek of protest from my pocket.

So, I'm back. What do I do now?

I set off in no particular direction, noting that the fires didn't seem to bother me anymore. I wondered if they were part of the natural state of the place, or if they were something that Brand had added to intimidate us. 'Hey, Uncle Brand, mind turning the heat down? The utility bills must be enormous.' Somehow, I had always imagined the Abyss as being a great big... nothing...?

I was tired of wandering aimlessly, so I tried to think of something I could do to tip the balance in my favor. Sooner or later Brand, or possibly Deirdre or Merlin or the other half of Lance, would be back, and I had no pretensions of taking them on, especially on *their* turf.

It would be nice to have reinforcements, but who could I call? I didn't trust the Trumps, not after Brand tricked us on the Chaos project. The thing with Lance had been sheer impulse...or maybe just stupidity! Then it occurred to me that all the forms we had seen writhing in the flames, in our attempts to call the older generation...well, they had to be here. Where else?

I cast around for a sign of consciousness, something on a psychic level, grimly aware that I might be biting off more than I could chew. If I contacted some creature of this place, who knew what it could do to me? Somewhere, out on the edges of my awareness, I caught a flicker or something that felt familiar.

Ha! Familiar? My inner voice told me how foolish I was. What if it was Brand? Hmmmm, I probed a little harder. Don't think so.... I began walking in that direction.

While I walked, I stretched my new-found Power to find a way to counteract Brand's flaming attack (just in case I was wrong about my target). I finally realized that if I concentrated, I could turn myself into a being made of ice, and I knew at once that this form

could withstand Brand's fires.

Handy, but decidedly uncomfortable! I hate being cold (although not as much as burning) and I felt as if this form was trying to take over, slowing my mind and reflexes, freezing me solid. When I was sure how it was done and could get it back in a hurry, I dropped the icy shield. When and if....

Then I found Corwin.

He was standing in a ring of flame, in a position that looked as if he'd been poised for an attack when he was taken. There was a fierce expression on his face, and his sword (Grey-something-or-other) was in his hand. Mindful of Lance in my pocket, and eager for allies, I decided to see what I could do about getting him out.

As I studied the problem, I discovered that Corwin was using a form of my ice shield to maintain his mind and his body in the ring of fire. O.K., so I didn't invent anything new.... I probed the fiery ring, and realized that it was a magical construction. That stumped me for a moment, because I never mess with magic....

I took another approach. Everything is powered by *something*. Even magic. Now there are people out in Shadow with no Pattern, and no Logrus, who manage very well, but it's still powered by something. There is a theory that they can tap the dynamic caused by these two energies straining against each other...never mind...it doesn't matter. Power always has a source.

I probed the ring, and realized that it was powered by the energy from the Abyss, the same stuff I was using. After that, it was easy. I just cut it off.

As the flames died around him, Uncle Corwin dropped his shield and crouched, ready to spring into the attack he had been ready to launch. He was quick! I dodged frantically, but his blade followed, inches from my throat. I guess he thought I was Brand. Well, I do have red hair, but really...we're built differently, Uncle Brand and me....

"Don't kill me, Uncle!" I yelled. "It's me, Bronwyn. I just rescued you!" (Nice touch, I thought.)

He paused, and the blade lowered, but only slightly.

"Bronwyn?" His voice sounded rusty from disuse. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you." Uncles like to be flattered.

"How did you get me out of that ring?" He sounded suspicious. They always lump me in with Dad and Brand and Fiona.

"I shut off the power," I explained.

"How?" he demanded, unsatisfied. It's the hair. They don't trust us.

"I shut off the power source."

"What was it?"

What was this, twenty questions? "The Abyss," I told him. "I'm controlling it."

That shut him up for a moment or so....

He was eyeing me oddly. For a few seconds, he seemed at war with his credibility quota. I was beginning to enjoy myself.

"By the way," I told him, "I have Lance in my pocket."

"Let me get this straight," he said slowly. "We're in the Abyss, and *you're* controlling its power source?"

"Yes."

"What can you do with it?"

"Dunno. Just about anything, I think. Some things, anyway...." He was pinning me down. "I rescued *you*."

He shook his head, as if he were trying to clear away the cobwebs. "Yes, you did," he agreed. "But can you get me back to Amber?"

I shook my head. "Only to the edge of the Abyss. I tried to go back to Amber myself, and that's as far as I got."

"Only to the edge of the Abyss?" he yelled. "That's in Chaos!"

'No kidding?!?' I thought.

He was getting as annoying as Lance, and I snapped, "Well, what do you want? You're out of the ring! You're supposed to be the Elder. What, do I have to do *everything* for you?"

Snotty, wasn't I?

He subsided, looking puzzled and chagrined. I guess my cheap shot hit home.

"Well, what do *you* want to do, then?" he asked me pleasantly. He sounded like he was trying to humor a child.

I shot him a glare. "Find the others, for a start. I was looking for reinforcements when I found you. They've got to be around here somewhere. Are you coming or staying?"

He followed, still trying to be civil. I don't like to be patronized. I *had* rescued him, after all.

"Can you manipulate the environment, while you're here?" he asked.

He was being polite, so I nodded.

"Then, how about getting rid of this fire?"

"I was just thinking about doing that when I found you," I told him. "How about a beach?"

I concentrated for a moment, and the scene around us transformed. We were standing on sand, and the surf crashed softly over to our left under the black skies of the Abyss. I pictured a string of condos in the distance, maybe a cabana or two, but I didn't want to waste any more time. Uncle Corwin was staring at me strangely. He

said nothing, but his eyebrows were about an inch higher than they'd been before.

I began walking again, and he followed. He didn't offer any more bright suggestions, and I was glad.

One thing about the sand. It made it easier to find the rings of fire that Brand had stuck my uncles in. We found Random next. I concentrated on shutting down the power of the spell, and then he was free.

I was grateful for his reaction. Unlike Corwin, he didn't try to skewer me or anything like that. He straightened, flashed me a smile and a jaunty wave, and joined Corwin at my side.

"Thanks, babe," he told me.

"I'll take a Regency," I told him, pushing my luck.

Random gripped my arm, swung me around, and looked me straight in the eye. "You've got it, kid."

WOW!

I couldn't say anything, so I just turned and motioned for them to follow me. They fell into step beside me without further comment. Good thing, because I don't think I was capable of speech right then. Eat your heart out, Daddy!

We found Benedict, and then Gérard, and I set them free in good order, repeating my trick with the Power. I could tell that Random was impressed. Corwin just shrugged and kept flashing me looks of suspicion, mingled with disbelief. I wanted to laugh or dance. I did neither. I was completely drunk on the power within me, and enjoying the knowledge that I could do something that four of the most powerful Lord of Amber were totally incapable of doing for themselves. It was *wonderful*!

They picked their way along the beach beside me, discussing the situation, and trying to decide what our next step should be. I was only half-listening to them. From time to time their voices would drop low, and I knew they were discussing me and all this stuff that I was doing. I didn't care. The Abyss was singing in my blood, and I was feeling fine. Here, I could do anything I wanted. Here, I was all powerful, and they were nothing! Well, almost....

Random caught up with me, and put an arm around my shoulders. The others were hanging back, so I figured he had some talking to do and didn't want any interference. He has always been kind to me, so I paused to hear him out.

"Uh, Bronwyn, it's really important that I, we get back to Amber. We've got to keep Brand away from the Patterns, get some kind of defense going...Corwin says you can't send us."

I nodded. "I can only get you to the edge of the Abyss. You'll have to walk from there."

"Yeah, that's what Corwin said." He looked frustrated, but he

grinned at me anyway...you know, that way he has. I don't wonder that the Unicorn picked him to be King. He has a way of making any situation seem, well...not as bad as you thought it was. I think I would have done anything for him then.

"Think. There's got to be something you can do," he persisted.

I thought. Nothing occurred to me. I could feel the Abyss singing in my spirit.

"Maybe we should just stay here, and let Brand come to us," I suggested. I was feeling pretty cocky. With those four at my back, I was beginning to feel that maybe, just maybe, I could take him. Random looked doubtful.

"Can you call him back here?" he asked.

"Haven't tried." I reached out to see if I could sense Brand's presence, and got nothing. I sent out a tentative challenge. No reply.

"I don't think so," I sighed. "Maybe we should try the Trumps. I don't know who, if anybody, is free, and sometimes Brand interferes. It can do one of two things...either get us in touch with someone who can help, or draw Brand's attention to the fact that we're alive and kicking."

"*Now* you're talking!" He gave my shoulders a little shake. "Now, do you happen to have any Trumps on you?"

"You don't have yours?"

He grinned at me again, and shook his head. "Fresh out. They must have been confiscated when we were, uh, out of it."

I fished my Trumps out of my pocket, and handed them to him. Lance told him, "Hi, Random," and waved, and Random gave me another one of those weird and wary looks I had been getting from the bunch of them since I'd set them free. I just shrugged, and smiled reassuringly. He dealt Lance from the top of the deck and handed him to me.

"Bronwyn! What about my body?" Lance asked, a little frantically, on the way back to my pocket.

"I'm working on it. I'm working on it," I told him.

If Corwin heard him speak, he gave no sign. Maybe he was unwilling to question me further. I thought of offering him Lance's Trump, but decided against it. I didn't want to wait around while they staged their reunion. Later.

Random was shuffling through the Trumps, looking for someone to call. Many of the cards still felt hot...now that we were on the beach, the ambient temperature was lower, almost chilly. He separated them into two piles, hot and cold, and studied them, frowning.

"Suggestions?" he asked me.

I shrugged, took the cool deck, and considered. There were some of them I wouldn't call if I were dying. I shuffled Dad and Fiona and

a few others to the back. Finally, I settled on Godfrey. He had been pretty much in charge of our forces when we were separated, and his card was still cool. Maybe he could give us an idea of how they were progressing....

"Try this one," I suggested.

Random nodded, and began concentrating on the Trump. My uncles moved in to hear what Random was doing, and I made room for them, falling in beside Corwin.

The look on Godfrey's face was something to behold! Me and Random and Corwin and Gérard and Benedict standing on a beach, under the black sky of the Abyss. I'll hand it to him. He didn't waste time with stupid questions. He blinked once, and then rattled off a status report as though he'd had it ready all along, and was just waiting for the call.

No, there was no one outside of the Palace troops guarding Amber, but the situation there seemed stable. The trouble seemed to be centered around the Unicorn's Grove, which was where they believed Brand was planning to stage the final confrontation. They (Godfrey, Kayen, Damien, and a few others) were headed there right now. Did we want to come through?

"Yes!" My uncles were unanimous. Random handed the card to Benedict, and went through to Godfrey right away. Gérard followed. Benedict gave the Trump to Corwin, who was trying to usher me forward....

NO! STOP! You don't understand....

Panicked at the thought of leaving my only source of Power, I shook my head wildly and backed away. Corwin stared at me, puzzled.

"I can't go!" I shouted. "Away from here, I'm powerless! Stay here, I'll draw Brand through. I swear it!"

"Bronwyn, we've got to!" he protested. "We can't let him get to the Grove. We've got to fight him!"

"You said you wanted to fight him. I can draw him back here, I know I can! You'll see! He hates me! When he finds out I'm here, messing around with his stuff and setting people free and all that, he'll be back. I...."

He was too fast for me. He grabbed me with one arm and dove through the Trump, giving me no time for further argument. As we toppled through the Rainbow shimmer, I cursed him with every oath I'd ever heard from Uncle Caine's sailors. He ignored me. I guess he'd heard worse....

When our feet hit the solid ground again, he let me go and started after the others, who were disappearing into the distance toward the Grove. I would have to follow him, or shift Shadow back

to Amber. The Power was so dim, I could hardly feel it anymore. I ran after him, snarling in rage and frustration, but he was too far ahead to hear.

It was like running in a dream...you know, when your feet are moving, but you aren't getting anywhere. I struggled to keep up with Corwin, but my legs are short, and although he wasn't making a whole lot of good time, he managed to outdistance me.

Puffing and panting, hours it seemed....

Finally, he broke over a small rise that led to a little vale, where the trees thinned out to a clearing. There was something wrong with the Grove. The trees looked burnt and sere, and the grass was brown beneath my feet. I'd never been there before, but I knew this wasn't right.

In the clearing, some kind of structure rose out of a wall of thorns that seemed impenetrable to me, though others were hacking their way through it with all manner of implements of destruction. I picked the route that Uncle Gérard had taken, since it was wider and flatter than the rest (Uncle Gérard is a *big* guy) and followed the others towards the center.

It seemed awfully quiet, up ahead....

By the time I caught up with Gérard, I could hear nothing but the sound of someone singing something strange and the crackle of flames. Then I could hear Brand laughing.

I ran smack into Uncle Gérard, who was standing still, staring straight ahead as if observing the scene with great interest. I ran straight into his back, and he never even moved, never even swayed a little. I glanced around him and noticed the others, all frozen like statues in positions that looked as if they'd been ready to attack, but they'd been suddenly turned to stone. I peered around Gérard, trying to assess the situation without being seen. It was really bizarre!

In the middle of the clearing was a brick-work ring, with what looked for all the world like a barbecue pit in the center. The Unicorn was chained to the brick, and Harlan, in flames, was standing above her, yanking her head back by the horn. Her eyes were rolling, and she made little nickering sounds of distress that nearly broke my heart.

Brand stood nearby, with an enormous spear in his hands, staring at someone who was rolling on the ground. It was Moradin. He was singing, "I'm H-A-P-P-Y! I'm H-A-P-P-Y...."

Brand was laughing. Moradin sounded ready to break into another chorus, and I figured he'd lost his mind for good. So did Brand. He walked over to Moradin and nudged him with a fiery foot, saying in an oddly gentle, placating voice, "It's all right, son. Time to go home now. We can't be acting this way, in front of all this

company, can we now...?"

Quick as a snake, Moradin swung a leg around and took Brand down, with a crackle and a crash. He grabbed both legs in a bear hug and scrabbled around, crab-wise to avoid Brand's flailing arm. He kept edging him towards the pit.

For a moment they grappled on the ground, neither with a clear advantage, and with similar looks of rage on their faces. Crazy like a fox. That Moradin's *O.K.*

The thing that had been Harlan let go of the Unicorn's horn, and she slumped to her knees at his feet. He looked as if he wanted to do something to help his master, but knew he wasn't supposed to leave his post.

The Unicorn looked safe for the moment. Brand was our main problem. The fight was going tit for tat. Nobody was winning. Somehow, I had to shift the balance in our favor.

I looked around at the others, still frozen in place, and knew that they would be no help to us. Something was damping out their Pattern, and paralyzing them physically as well. The only thing that I could see was a little black box that spun madly a little above Brand, but it wasn't doing anything that I could see to have that effect. Besides, I had no idea about how to shut it off.

I felt confused and powerless...or was I?

It had crept back, so natural and familiar that I had barely notice it was there. Now I felt it calling to me again, swelling me with Power. The Abyss! Brand had managed to tap it, even here in the Grove. He had punched a hole right through the fabric of the multiverse, and brought it with him!

I got so angry, I guess I didn't think....

"You leave my grandmother alone!" I shrieked, running towards Brand and Moradin as they grappled and rolled.

They ignored me. In a tangle of arms and legs, they were suddenly still, locked in a battle of wills. Moradin is no slouch in the mental department, when all of his marbles are functioning at once, but I knew that Brand was stronger, 'cause I'd faced him myself. I dove for Moradin, and lent him some of mine.

For a few moments we waged our psychic war, with no clear advantage on either side. Moradin was strong, but Brand seemed to be gaining some physical advantage, and even though he looks like a little shrimp, he had managed to edge Moradin and me away from the center of the pit. Apparently, he doesn't need to concentrate as hard as we do. We were losing ground!

Without thinking, I shifted my grasp from Moradin's shoulder to Brand's leg, hoping to lend my back as well as my mind.

This was the mistake that nearly cost me my life....

Brand let out a tremendous shriek of triumph, and I gasped in

horror as I felt his Power master mine! He had turned the energy of the Abyss against me. We struggled, very briefly. Then, to my horror, I was lost.

Somewhere, deep in my being, a little part of me was howling in despair. I straightened, my face twisted in the rictus of a smile, and advanced on Moradin.

He shrieked, and let go of Brand, dancing away from his father's outstretched grasp and back-pedaling on the edge of the pit. I followed. My will was Brand's. Kill!

He backed away, staring at me in horror. Brand's version of the Abyss whispered its suggestions in my ear, and I was delighted! Puny wretch! I would take pleasure in destroying him. Brand circled to outflank him. *Damn You, I can take care of this myself!* And then I would kill them all....

It happened so fast, I had no idea how he did it, but out of somewhere, something hit me on the back of the head and sent me toppling forward to my knees. Dimly, I was conscious of the palms of my hands scraping painfully along the brick, and the little part of me that was still sane and whole prayed that someone would kick me into the pit and end my agony. But Moradin made a quick move and grabbed the black box out of the air, and did something...I don't know what....

The blast sent me toppling backwards. I almost got my wish and fell into the pit. I blacked out momentarily....

When I came to, I had my will back.

The brick was shattered and blackened from the blast, and the ground at its edges was blown away. Everyone was moving. Brand was down, and Eleanor was grappling with him now. She looked like she was trying to twist his head from his shoulders.

In my groggy condition, that seemed like as good an idea as any I could think of, so I grabbed his feet and twisted in the other direction. I noticed an arrow in his chest, right where the heart would be, provided that he had one....

As the flickering hatred in his eyes dimmed and then died completely, we straightened and exchanged glances. I saw the little reticule dangling at her wrist, and realized that it was she, and not Moradin, who had bludgeoned me from behind.

I rubbed the back of my head, where a painful lump was swelling, trying my best to look grateful. She grinned at me. Then she took Brand's arms, and I took his legs, and we tossed him over the side. Back to the hell he had come from....

Corwin, Random, Benedict and Gérard shouldered past us and started doing something...magical, I assumed...trying to close the pit.

Godfrey had jumped onto the brick and freed the Unicorn with a

stroke of his sword, severing the chain that held her. She bounded away, and was gone.

Then Godfrey dragged the dis-animated form of Harlan, who had apparently dropped with the blast like me. Godfrey and some others started doing something with a Trump to revive Harlan. Well, if a Trump will revive anyone, it's probably going to be Harlan.

I was dizzy and sick from the blow and the shock of the blast, and my knees buckled as I dragged myself away from the scene of the mayhem, looking for a place to sit down and have a nice bout of hysterics. I figured I deserved it.

As I made my way toward Damien, he began to shout for help, and I had enough energy left to be affronted. I knew I looked bad, but I figured since I wasn't flaming anymore....

Then I saw the ground crumbling away beneath his feet, bits of rock and dirt falling in around him. Something was scrabbling below, as though trying to get out. Lords! Looked like Brand had one more Ace up his sleeve!

Frantically, I reached out to Damien and grabbed his arm, preventing him from falling in. Then we were both backing away from the hole, as the soil around us lost its solidity and began collapsing inward. Devoid of Pattern and without the Abyss to sustain me, I screamed and reached out for whatever it was that had helped me before. It hadn't been answering lately, but it was the best I could do!

This time it answered.

It was not quite what I had expected. *Not by a long shot!*

There was a weird little shimmer around me, not like a Trump, but close. Then, to my amazement, my father and Fiona stood beside me, smiling as though they were really pleased about something. I gaped, mouth open, for an instant. And then Aunt Fiona reached out and patted me on the shoulder.

"Good *girl*, Bronwyn," she murmured absently, just like I was a spaniel who had successfully fetched the newspaper. Ignoring the chasm that was opening around us, she and Dad both brushed past me, intent on lending their support to their brothers, who were having some trouble, it seemed, with their magical task.

"Daddy!" I wailed, fighting the nausea that was only half-caused by the beating I had taken.

"Not now, baby," was all he said.

BABY!?!?!?!?

There was no time for the invective that rose to the tip of my tongue. The hole in the ground had widened, and something dark and dreadful was rising from its center. Demons, and lots of them! Damien was shouting at me to help him, and had drawn several daggers from his sleeves and boots. (He is positively *bristling* with

them.) He poised to throw.

From out of nowhere, a dart came flying, striking one of the demons in the eye. It screamed and began to smoke, clawing at its face as it burst into flames. Then Damien hit one with a dagger, and it toppled backwards, also in flames.

"Give me one of those!"

He flipped me a dagger, and I caught it clumsily, nearly skewering my hand in the process. Eleanor appeared out of nowhere beside me.

"Give me that, before you hurt yourself," she said, plucking the dagger from my fingers. She turned it neatly, and set it ripping through the air, straight on the money. Then she followed up with some more darts....

Good thing *she* knows which end of the blade has the point!

Moradin was fighting too, along with Damien and Eleanor. All the rest were being helpful at the barbecue pit (or just trying to learn something new). No help from that quarter. Lords! There were *more of them*. As fast as they died, new demons were climbing out!

I snatched up a rock that had been torn up when the earth had opened, and hurled it at the one that was nearest to me. It howled, and fell backwards into the hole. Then Damien killed another, and Eleanor and Moradin dispatched the last.

We waited, but no more demons appeared.

Then everyone was laughing and patting each other on the back. I hugged Damien and Eleanor. I even hugged Moradin. Then we were fetched up short by a noise from the hole that made us assume our defensive positions once more!

It seemed as though the floor of the hole was rising, and we tensed, weapons (or rocks) in hand, waiting to see what new horrors the hole would deliver.

I'm glad we held our fire!

From the depths of the Lords know where, the Unicorn sprang from the hole, white and golden and beautiful. As she appeared, it seemed like the sun came out again, and a feeling of peace and relief washed over me. She trotted out into the Grove, ignoring the scene of the battle, and where she passed, the grass grew green again and the flowers bloomed. I watched in awe and wonder as the trees, once blackened by fire, burst into blossom and leaf. Birds sang. Far away, I could hear the ripple of a tiny stream....

I was all too much for me. The crisis was over. Weak-kneed, I sank to the ground, hoping to save myself the fall. Then I did the last possible thing a lady can do in these situations.

I fainted.

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Lloyd: Character for a day...

by Erick Wujcik

Lloyd wasn't the first Amber player character I've had, but Scott Thoms was the first Amber Game Master I've had who learned the game on his own, with no input from me. In fact, I only met the guy an hour before the game.

For those of you who don't know the *Amber* system, it starts with an Attribute Auction for the four basic attributes, Psyche, Strength, Endurance and Warfare. Rankings, first, second or tenth, are merely a convenience to help the players evaluate each other. Only the first place ranking in any attribute can be confident, since players can secretly spend points to increase their attributes.

After receiving the basic stats, each player spends a fair amount of time spending the character points and consulting with the Game Master.

If you could look at Lloyd's character sheet, you'd see a total of 100 points, the most common base score for starting characters. One thing you don't see here is Lloyd's list of spells. That's because most players develop their own unique spells. And I don't care to give mine away. After all, I *like* playing Lloyd.

I will reveal that Lloyd has white hair, with a streak of orange-red, and eyes colored sort of a washed-out blue. Otherwise, he looks pretty bland, with pleasant looks, clean shaven face and a ready smile. He's 116 years old and prefers a symbol of a coiled green snake.

Slick is Lloyd's pet ferret, of mysterious origins and definitely with a touch of the supernatural. Like most ferrets he is curious, inquisitive, and can be vindictive. He dislikes birds of prey (hawks and the like). He has dark reddish fur and washed out blue eyes that exactly match the color of Lloyd's eyes (strangers are often startled when seeing four similar eyes tracking right next to each other - as Slick peers over Lloyd's shoulder). Slick is well versed in certain of Lloyd's powerful spells and is capable of using them to great effect.

About ninety minutes after we started all the characters were finished and we were all ready to go.

Most of the events of the game are recorded in Lloyd's diary. His descriptions of the other characters (the player names are in parentheses) are based on their standings from the auction and anything they revealed in the course of play. Of course, there were quite a few things that happened when Lloyd wasn't around, and those items are missing.

The entire game took just under three hours to play. Please note

that my comments (and insults) on the other characters don't refer to the players. That I would have such nasty things to say about them should tell you just how fine all the characters were role-played.

Since 1988 I've been able to play Lloyd in a couple of "Cross-Over" sessions. Starting with "Entry 7" you'll find Ron Miller's scenario.

LLOYD'S DIARY

Entry 1: [Windsor Gaming Convention/July 16th, 1988/Scott Thoms GMing] The announcement of Dad's death was made public today. Shouts of "The King is dead!" rang through the city streets. Which was sad but not unexpected. It was the next line, "Long live young King Aden!" that filled me with bile.

Entry 2: The formal gathering of our brethren, chaired by the Regent, was hardly auspicious. Since Roderik had died some years ago, the following were present:

ADEN (Dave), or as I prefer, Aden the Addled. Just days before he had told me that he'd be willing to play pawn. I'd turned him down. Now, with certain flatterers propping him up, he believes that the throne is his destiny. Well, not if I have anything to say about it. Strong (2nd only to Malachi) and Tough (2nd only to Barker), he just doesn't have the spine for the job.

DRENGOR (Eric) is the weakest of my fighting brothers (#4 in Warfare) and the least tough of those who value toughness (#3 in Endurance). Otherwise he seems a cipher.

ADAM (Joe) is at least decisive. He addressed me privately as "My Liege" from the beginning. He is well-rounded (#3 in Warfare, #3 in Psyche, and #3 in Strength) and a man I will be glad to have at my back.

MALACHI's (Keith) bullying instincts rarely leave him. His primacy in Warfare and Strength require that I humor him, but, in truth, he is too much of a threat. He claims not to desire the throne, and I think that he wants others to force it upon him. Again, I don't think he has the political savvy to make this happen.

BARKER (Jeff Hayes) is my true rival, the only one of my brothers who cares to joust in an arena other than that of weapons and muscles. He is nearly my equal in Psyche (#2), but makes up for it by having a toughness and endurance (#1) that I can only envy. In a mind-to-mind conflict I must defeat him quickly, otherwise he will be able to wear me away by inches. I suspect that he dabbles in sorcery, but exactly what is his focus, I have not yet discovered.

ULRICH (Julius Rosenstein), or Ulrich the Faithful, the first to jump on the Aden bandwagon. He is too honest for lies, so I'll have

to be straight with him. I don't agree with his stand, but I respect him for his sense of honor. I also have to respect his skill with a sword (#2 in Warfare). Perhaps if I can get he and Adam to work together, I can take out Malachi...

Seeing the possible bloodshed among my, predominantly muscular, brothers, I proposed a truce. That none among us would attack any others, at least until after our father was buried. The punishment to any violator to be the enmity of all. And, although our father's burial was scheduled in three days, I was already thinking of ways of delaying the ceremony, and thus, the end of the truce.

Entry 3: Spent the next two hours chanting along with the monks in front of Dad's slab. And, incidently, entered a small, magical, "observer" into the room... Once done with the prayers, I circulated among my brothers, feeling out their alliances, and proposing to each that we all meet in my room after dinner. The topic to be discussed, missions to chaos, so as to sort out the best among us by meeting a true enemy, rather than spilling each other's blood. All were in agreement.

Entry 4: Things happened.

After dinner, after the agreement was reached in my chambers, we were interrupted by grim news. Our father's body was stolen. I was temporarily at a loss, glancing at the hidden drawer where the scroll was hidden. I shook off the feeling, after all, I had not planned on removing the corpse for yet another day...

We charged to the scene of the crime. There, my 'observer' reported that someone had entered the room, clad in a spell of invisibility, had laid hands upon the body, and (probably) teleported it elsewhere.

Malachi, Drengor and Aden started working on finding a trail, eventually tracking something down to the caverns under the castle. Barker retired to his chambers, keeping in contact via Trump (thus revealing an ability that I had not previously suspected!). I took Adam and Ulrich and went to the Pattern Room, my plan being to teleport directly to the body from its center.

Standing over the body (which was inside a gunny sack) we found ourselves on a fast moving ship. Its crew were pirate/mercenaries, a rough-looking lot who were quickly cowed by my use of a spell. Their leader was not so easily dealt with. He shook off a spell to the heart (!!) and retreated. Leaving Ulrich to watch our backs, Adam and I went after the Captain. Unfortunately, we had not seen an archer hidden above us. Adam went down with a serious shaft into his chest cavity. Barely pausing, I took out the archer with a dagger through the throat. Yelling at Ulrich to stay

back, I followed the Captain into the darkness.

Ignoring the screams from other doors, I found our opponent drawing in some kind of magic. A Power Word "Surge" foiled his plan, knocking both of us down and away from the other. Fortunately, at this point, Malachi led a contingent of guards to the rescue. His fighting prowess (plus the magic of his blades) combined with a couple of other spells, let us subdue the pirate leader.

Ulrich stayed on the pirate vessel, while the rest of us returned to the castle with our prisoner. He held four things of interest, a strange scroll (which I am about to translate), a chaos-powered dagger, a magicked pocket watch-weapon, and, most interesting, a silver case filled with trump. Of the strange trump only two were familiar, my father and *my* mother (none of the other ladies were illustrated). My suspicions of Barker bounded when he pocketed these trump...

Entry 5: Our prisoner proved far to wily for his own good. Although surrounded by five of us, stripped, and jailed in an iron cage, he still managed to flee. Before that we had discovered that his mission was to recover his "cousin's" body (our father) and return it to his "homeland" for burial. Threats were fairly useless as he revealed little else save for his own arrogance. About all we know is that he can shape-shift without effort, can perform magic, can call upon the forces of chaos, and is frightened only of the pattern. In trying to stop him I was forced to use the only weapon that seemed effective, the pattern. It killed him.

Entry 6: My triumph was muted. All that I have worked for, my coronation, with the unanimous consent and approval of my brothers, has come to pass. They would never have agreed had not the threat from chaos seemed so great. After all, what chance would we have had against opponents like our prisoner, if our numbers were diminished or our forces divided? I now rule. Reforms are in order. There is an enemy at the gates...

Entry 7: [AMBERCON 1990/Ron Miller, Jim Kenny & Carol Dodd GMing] She started calling me as I stared at my best hand of the evening. So far my brother Barker, Guard Sergeant Deleclete, Chris the Palace Torturer, and I, King of Amethyst, were losing steadily. Juando wasn't the best cook we've ever had, but he sure knew his poker.

Muddy Waters was reverberating through our hidden retreat, a former dungeon cell. I was looking at three aces and garbage. And just then my visit from Lady Luck was replaced by another lady.

The bickering over our next choice of music was suddenly

hushed up by Barker. I've got to hand it to my brother, he may be a sucker for an inside straight, but he always knows when something's coming down. "What's up?" he asked.

"I don't know," truthfully, "something's drawing me to the Pattern Room..."

He looked uncomfortable. I know he avoids the Pattern like the plague. More so, since the plague couldn't kill him.

"Okay Barker, you trump the brothers, the rest of you guys rouse up the guards, and I'll go check out the Pattern."

I didn't stick around for his look of relief.

Everything was fine, except for the pressure in my head, until I rounded that last corner. Then I was really worried. The door was there, the key, the wall. But it wasn't the way I remembered it. And it's not something I'm likely to forget.

Barker answered his trump fast. Not that he did me much good. He couldn't see the changes. Still, he wasn't slow to calculate the advantages of being the first to learn that his brother, the king, was going bonkers. On the off chance that something was really wrong, I told him I might be gone for awhile.

I didn't like the look in his eye, but something wanted me **now**.

Inside there was a woman standing in the center of the Pattern. That worried me. Y'see, I don't have any sisters.

Still, she was quite a babe, and she seemed happy to see me. In the blink of an eye she was next to me.

Boy, she didn't stay happy long. I somehow intuit that she was the embodiment of the Pattern itself. Or something like that.

Which didn't stop her from ragging me about taking so long to get there. And why didn't I notice that things were washed out? And didn't I know the Jewel was missing?

Cheessh!

I cut through the obligatory nag as fast as I could and asked her straight out, what did she want me to do?

For a primal force of nature she sure talked a lot. Eventually I pieced together the important parts.

Something called the Jewel of Judgement, which used to belong to Dad, had been stolen. To chase it down I'd have to walk the Pattern.

She was midway through some lame excuse about how I'd have to leave my brothers behind, when I cut her off and started walking the damn thing. No way was I letting those boneheads take off with me. They'd need every warm body in Amethyst just in case the Courts of Chaos decided to make a move.

I attained the center. I breathe a sigh of relief. I see her starting up again. I get out quick.

Entry 8: Great. Just great.

Not only was I in the middle of nowhere, with nothing but trees, mountains and the sea to keep me company, but somebody had fiddled with the color control on the set.

I found myself in some crazy shadow where everything was black, white, or something in between. At first I thought monochrome vision might be a property of the place. But no, all I had to do was look down. Nice light green sweater, dark green jeans, flashes of gold on wrist and finger and dagger handle. The sounds weren't washed out, I'd never heard waves quite so majestic, or bird calls so pure of pitch.

Ich! The sooner I got out, the better.

Unfortunately neither Trump nor Shadow Shifting seemed to have any effect. Nix to magic teleportation.

I picked out some hapless tree for a bit of experimenting. Then I blasted it with a few Power Words. Negation of chaos, psyche, pattern, trump, and magic.

At least the tree came out unscathed.

That left the obvious fourth choice, walking.

Along the way I tried teleporting the Jewel to me. Nothing.

After a hell of a long walk, I finally came to a town. A band was tuning up, people were walking around, and they seemed to be giving away food.

When I got to the lady's auxiliary spread, I introduced myself as a stranger to the best looking one of the bunch. She fed me, a quality I admire in a woman, and helped me notice a quality of all these people. Not only were they all black and white, they were also blind.

I probably would've stuck around a bit longer, but the next item on the musical menu was an oompa band. The kindly lady pointed me to the nearest castle.

Another hike took me there.

Talk about an open kingdom! I walked that whole castle, exchanged friendly greetings with everyone, and didn't encounter so much as a word of discouragement. Having assured myself that nothing was hidden in the dungeon, I climbed to the highest battlement.

From my perch I surveyed the colorless landscape. Ocean behind me. Mountains ahead of me. I picked a far, high point and teleported myself hence.

I got there, but I didn't like it much.

The power for the spell had soaked right out of the pitiful amount of Pattern left in my body. Turns out I had the only Pattern in the whole land.

I was going to have to teleport again, but no way was I going to drain myself again.

I had a spell for the occasion. Draw Energy or Force.

I had already tried Pattern, Trump, Magic, and Logrus.

No dice.

Okay. How about the stuff that binds the rock together? It didn't bother me how many rocks crumbled. It worked, and I even got a bit more energy than ordinary rock would yield.

Finally, a clue!

Sure enough, there was a power holding this land together. Vibration!

Which gave me a thought. The vibration would be greater as one approached the source. I checked a few spots.

My previous course was correct. I was already heading for the source of the vibrations.

Sucking in the vibrations, I could teleport endlessly. I blipped to the next mountain range. And the next. And the next...

Entry 9: I had drawn quite close to the source of the vibrations, when I suddenly found myself confronted with a strange trio. Although as monochromatic as the others I'd met, these beings were definitely not blind, and they were plenty adept at the powers of the mind as well.

I stepped back fast to avoid being flanked, and readied Slick in one hand and my dagger in the other. Plus, since I'd already completed my Draw Energy spell, I focused it on the newcomers. For information gathering, of course, but also just in case...

"Bright, isn't he?" remarked one, and I got the feeling they weren't commenting on my brain. No, even though they wore no color of their own, they could see that I was different.

"No offense folks," even with my dagger out, I didn't see any point in aggravating these strangers, "but what are your intentions?"

Turned out they weren't hostile. Arrogant maybe, but not hostile. I turned on the old Lloyd charm and did a little pressing of the flesh.

The center guy, name of Roche, turned out to be something like their leader, and a dude with high ambitions. His psyche was somewhere in my range. To my left was Selica, the woman. And to my right stood the other male, name of Anos, with his psyche pulsing like a beacon...

Which definitely gave me pause. First time in my not-so-young life that I've met my mental match. I reset my lifetime assumptions and resolved not to assume too much of any other strangers I might meet.

After the introductions, where I truthfully named myself king of Amethyst, we got to discussing color. It was as plain as a vote-counter's open palm that they saw the world around them first and

foremost in terms of sound. So I started to explain color in their terms, as different frequencies, or wave patterns, of light. Blue for my eyes, green (well, light green) for my shirt, and so forth.

About that time the flanking flunkies reported to Roche that other "strangers" had been sighted. I took careful note of the special vibrations that reverberated through their bodies, especially that which they invoked prior to their departure.

My thought was that it was high time that some of my brothers had arrived, so I wasn't disappointed to be left alone with Roche for awhile.

We talked of many things.

Turns out that his people were Discordians, the opponents of the Harmonites. Further, he had big ambitions, mainly to become one of the three overlords of Discordia. I fueled that with a few tidbits about the joys of being sole ruler, glossing over some of the drawbacks (and I should know).

All this was getting mighty confusing, so I asked Roche to fill me in with the whole story.

He responded with a story. It seems that there was once someone, or something, called the Banshee, the mother god of their reality. Sometime in the dim reaches Banshee was ambushed or trapped by the Siren, their greatest monster. The heart of the Banshee was taken, and eventually this heart was used by a rebel faction of Discordians, to create Harmony.

It would seem that he, among other Discordians, didn't look too fondly on Harmony. He called it, the "Foul Creation of Mystic Resonance."

Between Harmony and Discordia lay Echo, the local equivalent of shadow. And I sure wasn't going to mention that my realm had a lot more in common with Harmony than Discordia.

In any case, I pried further on the subject of the Banshee's heart. He described it as very similar to my objective, the Jewel of Judgement. I thought it might *be* the Jewel (time differentials being what they are), but thought it might be more advantageous to describe my Jewel as stolen, most probably by Harmonites wishing to use it to expand their domain.

He was impressed enough to talk of destroying any such artifact. So I had to be quick with as logical a line of bull as I could summon for the occasion. Something about how the Jewel's destruction would simply leave a void, and that the universe would replace it with something even worse, not necessarily in a position where it might be combated. Better, I explained, to send the Jewel off to my universe, where it might never trouble him again.

As I was getting the mass of his mind turned into more advantageous pathways, he was suddenly filled with a new sort of

energy.

Another form of vibration, this one apparently used for communicating.

It wasn't a silent method, I heard everything he had to say.

The "others" had been found, and Roche instructed that they be brought to him directly.

Surprise! They weren't any of my brothers after all!

Sure, they had color, and all the appearance of a noble of Amethyst. But I've never heard of a female with Pattern blood. The male was a burly red-head with his sword drawn and his temper already ignited. The other a female (!), tall, white-haired, with red shirt and blue jeans, and carrying a sword.

Right from the get-go big red was acting high and mighty, obviously pissed at the way the locals were treating him. Bad news for me, since Roche and the others would naturally assume that all us "bright looking" folks were together.

"Hey Red! Cool it!" already the Discordians were talking about him as if he wasn't there, discussing things like 'correction,' 'insults,' and 'punishment.'

No good. He kept bellowing and demanding the Jewel.

Ah! Something to key in on.

"Hey fella!" I put in as much of the honest truth as would serve my purpose, "these folks don't have the Jewel, they're the enemies of the guys who stole it."

At least the pattern lady caught my gist. She used whichever buttons it took to get the guy to back down a tad.

"I'm Lloyd," I said, cheerfully as I could manage, extending my hand to the big guy.

He ignored my hand, but at least he shut up long enough for me to fill him in on the lay of the land.

I told them about the Discordians and Harmonites, encouraging Roche to fill in details. And I made sure to get the whole sound versus sight angle across.

Eventually Carolan (red) and Morwena (the lady of Pattern) got into the swing of conversation.

"Where are you folks from," I asked.

"Amber."

"I'm the ruler where I come from, the same for you?"

"Oh no, our king is random."

Sounded like a hell of a system to me. While I'm not a strict monarchist, I think some kind of stable government is a good idea.

My mind was whirling with the political ramifications when they finally clarified. It seems their king's *name* was Random.

Anyway, the three of us got pretty chummy. Carolan was obviously a little ashamed of his earlier treatment of me, but I

glossed it over. We even exchanged trump cards, an act that substantially increased my meager deck, but had little impact on their fat collections. Then we put our heads together and came up with a few facts. Both of our realms had Jewels of Judgement, and both were stolen.

Eventually we got back to the local situation, discussing the whole Discordia, Harmony, Echo layout.

At which point Morwena made the bright observation that the Discordian most resembled the Courts of Chaos, and that our lands of Amber and Amethyst were obvious parallels to Harmony.

Must be a lot of room for stupidity in the place they call Amber. I mean, here we are surrounded by powerful Discordians, needing to recover the Jewel, or Jewels, so as to beat back the forces of Chaos (Discordia's natural allies), and she has to point out the obvious.

Which lead to the obvious hostile reaction from Roche.

I jumped in with both feet, explaining how things were a *lot* different where we came from, how any parallels were very, very tenuous, and how they needed us if they wanted to get rid of those nasty jewels, and how, anyway, back where we come from everything is just peaches and cream between Chaos and Pattern. It wasn't exactly the truth, but all the lords of Amethyst and Chaos were relatives, and we didn't have any actual war going at the moment, and what's an occasional murder and/or kidnapping between friendly powers anyway?

Fortunately my Amber counterparts either came from a place where Pattern and Chaos do get along, or else they lied well.

All of which led back to Roche's old idea of destroying the Jewels...

Anyway, to make a long story short, we eventually found out about an expatriate Harmonite living in Discordia, name of Wave, who might be able to help us get the Jewels back. And so there we went...

Entry 10: Wave provided us with another chunk of local history. It would seem that she was the daughter of Amanda, founder of Harmony, the twin sister of Wind, and sister to a whole batch of Harmonites starting with Barnabus, and then going on through Ludwig, Caranina (General of their army), Trevor, Lela and Gabriel. There was also stuff about Amanda's plans for something called "Duet," which might involve the Jewels, and about their analogue to Pattern, a Musical Synthesizer Pipe Organ.

Carolan's freckles flared up at this last idea. He had trouble picturing something like a Pipe Organ as being the local variation on Pattern. Personally, I thing the whole universe being dependent on the squiggles of some floor graffiti is pretty dumb. But nobody

asked me...

Anyway, eventually talk turned around to questions about communication and travel hereabouts. Which depended on something called the "Klatu," a disc-shaped object that reminded me of the round pitch-pipes used by my music teacher when I was just a toddler.

Carolan, who turned out to be something of a trump artist, tried the Klatu and found he could operate it. Then, on my suggestion, he tried merging the energies of trump with the energies of the Klatu. It took a few tries, but eventually we determined that Carolan could act as a conduit, knitting together Klatu vibrations with trump images.

The next step was to have Wave attempt a trump call. She had the Psyche, but her skills at visualization had atrophied. Still, with Carolan helping from the receiving end, she managed to make a call.

We were still fumbling our way around different approaches to Harmony when Carolan decided to try the way most obvious. He'd make a trump sketch of his Jewel of Judgement.

I agreed, seeing as we had nothing to loose.

Amazingly enough, it worked!

There they were, shimmering, dozens of Jewels, each with its own miniature Pattern. And just an arm's length away!

Of course, it couldn't be that simple. The Harmonites had barred the whole collection, so they couldn't be touched or removed.

Fine. I'd been waiting to counter one of their damn musical forces. I whipped out the Draw Energy spell and started channeling the vibrations from the barrier into trump energy to strengthen Carolan's contact.

No good. The energies were too powerful. I couldn't draw them out fast enough to drop the barrier.

Still, no problem. Ever since it dawned on me that music was the base power of this universe, I'd been thinking about how to counter it.

Keeping up the Draw Energy spell, I detached it from Carolan's trump, and channeled it back upon itself.

Now I had a closed loop, the energy of the barrier coming out and then re-entering the barrier.

Then it was just a matter of playing with the length of the loop. When it hit exactly the right distance, the barrier was nullified, and Carolan extended the trump and grabbed all the Jewels.

My trick?

It has to do with the wave pattern of sound. Every sound is created by waves with a high, low and middle point. When a sound wave is hit with exactly the same sound wave, but moved over half a

cycle, they cancel out. That's because each high point is neutralized by each low point, and vice versa.

Entry 11: Needless to say, we left Discordia in a hell of a hurry. Roche's desire to destroy the Jewels was a little too scary to put to the test.

We arrived, courtesy of another of Carolan's trump, at something called the Nexus. This, it would seem, is sort of a crossroads for all the various possibilities of Pattern.

I'd already pulled my Jewel of Judgement from the bag-full, looking for the one that was an exact match for my idea of Pattern. Carolan graciously filled me in on the details of "attuning" with the Jewel of Judgement, and I resolved I'd do it on the instant of my return to Amethyst.

Meanwhile we had possession of a lot of Jewels that didn't belong to us...

Putting temptation aside (easy for me, I don't know just what you can do with one of these bobbles, harder for Carolan and Morwena, who understand them better), we resolved to return each Jewel to its rightful owner.

Turned out to be simple enough. At the Nexus, each trump displays a multitude of images, each a variant residing on one of the infinite possibilities of Pattern. A trump talented guy like Carolan could pluck a Jewel of Judgement from our bag, and match it to the right image on the card.

After we'd exhausted the Random images, we moved on to other possibilities. There was even an Aden the Addled who'd made it to king. I was tempted to horde that particular Jewel, but eventually relented when I realized that my brothers in that realm had already suffered quite enough.

Entry 12: Here I sit, in the center of my own sweet Pattern. I am attuned to this thing. It may help, it may not.

Still, I am well satisfied.

I have returned a thing that was precious to my kingdom.

I have made friends with powerful beings from realities and Patterns other than my own.

But most of all, I've increased my cosmic karma immeasurably. Although I'm an anonymous contributor, I have still saved dozens of alternate Patterns.

Which, from a karmic point of view, ought to be worth *something*.

Farewell Chaos Ladies

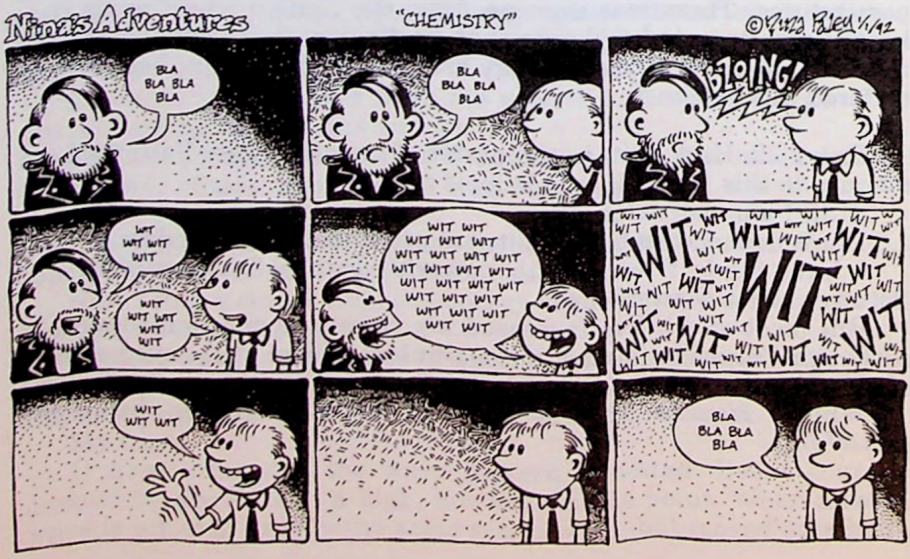
a song by C.R. Klessig

Farewell and adieu to you, Ladies of Chaos.
You sweet Chaos Ladies, farewell and adieu.
I'm leaving you now, and my back remains stab-less:
A major accomplishment, dealing with you!

My tongue has not tasted an arsenic flavor,
Although many times I have dined at your boards.
And my holy water remains unexpended,
Though demons, your servants, surround me in hordes.

Why am I still breathing, sweet Ladies of Chaos?
I'd like to believe it's my masculine charm.
Or else it's the force of my clever precautions
That's kept you, these five weeks, from doing me harm.

Alas! Though I'm fond of those comforting fables,
If I'm to be candid I fear I must own,
I rather suspect that I owe my survival
To standing nine hundred and eighth from the Throne!


Ninja's Adventures
"CHEMISTRY"
©Ninja Press 1/12
BLA BLA BLA BLA
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BLOING!
WIT WIT WIT WIT
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Columns & More Columns

Adding to Kevin Lowry's "From the Desk of the Lord of Chaos," we hope to have regular columns from Felicia Baker, Carol Dodd, Jim Kenny, Don Woodward, & others.

More about *Amber*...

Next up is "All Roads *Do* Lead to Amber" by Jane M. Lindskold. Originally published in *Extrapolation*, Volume 31, Number 4 (Kent State University Press). Here's a sample:

"...'Misli, gammi gra'dil, Strygalldwir' (1:193), a curse in Thari, language of Amber, which means: 'Be off, and bad luck to you' (Shepard 1212). Zelazny derived Thari from an actual language called Shelta Thari. Shelta Thari is purported to be the secret language of the tinkers, one of the most closely knit of the medieval guilds. The mystery of Shelta Thari's origins persist to the present day, making it the perfect ur-language of Amber..."

The Epic Beginning

For those of you who are curious about Carolan, Morgan, and Harlan, each mentioned in the *Amber* book, starting next issue we'll be presenting the nearly-infinite account of "The Banished Ones." Here's a tiny taste of Cathy Klessig's expert chronicle:

It was a fine night, in the Courts of Chaos. Niemand stood before his mirror, choosing his attire. The Courts were at war, but the war was far away, where wars belonged. He had a reasonably prestigious post with the support forces, which never required him to travel to the actual fighting. Life was good. Tonight, perhaps, he would meet a certain lady....

Then, he got a Trump call.

He paused, considering. Trump calls were usually routine, but every once in a while the caller turned out to be an enemy. Niemand had not reached his present age by taking unnecessary chances. He was already in his Chaos form...pretty durable. He took a few moments for some preparations. Then, he allowed the Trump contact to form, sound only.

"Sir." At once, Niemand recognized the deep, utterly correct voice. It was Vagrant, Chief of Protocol for Lord Azeroth. Vagrant was a man

who always, no matter his current height or position, seemed to be looking down his nose.

"Yes?" Trying for an equally detached tone, Niemand allowed the contact to form on a visual level. Now, they could both see each other. Vagrant, in his current form, was about seven feet tall and weighed a good 350 pounds. He was wearing scales that shimmered between green and bronze, brass and olive, in a pattern of lines that encircled his body. Over this, he wore a tuxedo vest, a black bow tie, and a glittering black G-string. If asked, he could doubtless explain at length why his form and attire were precisely suitable for the occasion.

"I have been instructed to contact you." Vagrant's tone managed to imply that without instructions Vagrant would ***never*** *contact Niemand. "It would seem that there is a matter requiring my Lord's attention, and he is not currently available..."*

Your Name Could be Here!

Thinking of sending something in to *Amberzine*?

Please do!

As you can see from this issue, most of *Amberzine* will be "campaign fiction." That refers to a huge body of notes, personal logs, and epic poems produced by players and Game Masters. However, This material **must** be based on real, on-going *Amber* role-playing. We're not interested in totally fictional *Amber* stories, but only in those things that are based on the use of the role-playing system.

Or, do you have some ideas about experimental, radical, or just plain new role-playing? *Amberzine* is the place to present 'em.

Amberzine is designed to discuss Zelazny's work in depth. We'd particulary like to see more pieces analyzing the philosophical & cosmological make-up of the *Amber* universe.

Payment in *Amberzine* can vary. Short pieces will be rewarded with a free copy, or with an additional copy added to a subscription. If you do something longer you'll actually get a check, for a minimum of $5 per printed page.

If possible, please send submissions on disk instead of paper. Most any MS-DOS or Macintosh disk are okay. If you really want to punch our buttons, send your copy on low density (720K) 3.5" disks in *WordPerfect 5.0*.

Art?

Oh, yes, please!

We'd love to see your Trump versions of player characters. Or any *Amber* subject. Please send clean black and white photocopies (**not** originals!).

Note, the editor has a particular fondness/weakness for cartoons.

Classified Advertising

Rates & Rules: Each subscriber is entitled to a free ad per issue, with up to 25 words. Non-subscribers, or subscribers needing additional ads, or additional words in a free ad, will pay .25 per word. Send full payment, name, address, and phone number with each ad. All classifieds will be run on a one-time only basis. Ads will be included as space permits. *Amberzine* reserves the right to reject, edit, and classify all advertising.

PERSONALS

WANTED: High Psyche sidekick. Pref. with background in Trump or Magic, Pattern optional. Position of GREAT importance. Lord G. of Amber, Box 0001. Willful types need not apply.

BIG BRO—Need to speak to you regarding "surprise party" for Lil' Bro. Reply urgent—Lil' Sis.

SINGLE/MALE Chaosian/-Amberite, seeks mature Amberite female for friendship & dating, relationship desired. Reply J. c/o Courts of Chaos.

DADDY: Come home, all is forgiven.

WANTED: New female vocalist for extablished rock band. Must be able to play innovative lead guitar. Serious applicants only, with no conflicting interests. "SHADOW" at Armaq.

ELDERLY Gentleman, 3,000+, seeks demure unicorn, or other primal force for romance & ??. Must be willing to accept a little eccentricity. Serpents need not apply. D.B. at Prime.

WANTED: A creature or creatures to quietly (but with great violence) remove a pompous, undeserving a** from a leadership position gained by accident of birth. Don't reply, just form a strong intent and I will find you.

GAME MASTERS WANTED

YOUR ad could go here if you are looking for enthusiastic Amber players!

PLAYERS WANTED

WHY WAIT? Place a classified in *Amberzine* and find that campaign you've been searching for.

CONVENTIONS

NEW JERSEY CABAL seeks others interested in putting on a regional AMBERCON. Write to Carol Dodd, 353 Vista Drive, Hunters Chase, Marlton, NJ 08053.

AMBERCON IV: Coming in March of 1993. It's not too early to get on the mailing list. Write: Phage Press, P.O. Box 519, Detroit, MI 48231-0519.

ART & ARTISTS

TALENTED? Express yourself in Rotel. Trump Classes starting now!

LOST & FOUND

Lost: Large ruby-like gem, on chain. Great sentimental value. Contact B. c/o Abyss. Reward.

GENEROUS REWARD for information leading to the recovery of female body, 5' 1" and 98 pounds, red hair, grey eyes, tasteful jewelry selection. Last seen Abyss. Confidentiality guaranteed. Contact B., Tower, Cabra Island.

LOST: One (1) Hellhound. Last seen chasing bus in vicinity of Shadow Earth. Answers to name "Odie." Prince J., Arden.

SERVICES

TIRED of unsolicited Trump calls? Let Jerry's Answering Service help! Messages taken, calls forwarded. Reasonable rates, first month free! All services in strictest confidence by our fast, courteous operators.

SLIP & FALL? Family dispute? Attempted assassination? B. Roth, attorney-at-Amber.

REAL ESTATE

Ocean View, 3 flrs+bsmt, 6 bdrms, 14 srvts, Rebma.

CASTLE for rent. Moat (w/o monster) Full eqpd. dungeon, complete with long-term detainees. Laryrinth only partly explored. Great fixer-upper. KK/Avalon.

"Igpay Arithay"

I reached into the turbulent pool of chaos and plucked out the larval creature between two newly formed claws; it had been hiding beneath the surface, and not very well. I held it closer for inspection and noted a lovely shade of chartreuse changing to mauve while its vestigial pods wiggled to free itself from my grasp.

"I've got you now, you vile creature," I said (of course it was *me* speaking, larvae don't say much), "Now what should I do with you?" I felt a psychic glimmer as the creature responded. "teach you a new word? Ohhh, okay,"

"We'll continue with Old High Thari rather than that bastardized pidgin that Oberon's brood use; ours is so much more precise." The psychic twinkle flickered on and off a few times.

"Don't laugh like that," I scolded the impertinent larvae, "it's not nice to make fun of our backward cousins."

"The word? ***Weltanschauung***—essentially your philosophy or conception of life, the universe, and where you fit into the big picture. Everyone has one, whether or not they can adequately quantify it for verbal description, and it affects how you respond to the world *and* vice-versa.

"Do you view reality through rose colored glasses, or is your perception of events clouded by a pall of fatalism? Having the proper *Weltanschauung* is important for mere shadow creatures, because it can affect how much pleasure they derive from their existence. But for a creature of substance, like either of us for example, it can influence events surrounding you. For primal creatures, solipsism is the rule, and because of this our very presence in Shadow causes a response."

"If you are pure-of-heart, courageous, and above all have a sense of humor, then the universe is your oyster–if you don't fear, you'll seldom have anything *to* fear; and if you find everything funny, then the universe will amuse you. On the other hand—excuse me, on the other pod—if you're a whiny little puke that feels tossed about by the whims of fate, then you will be."

I listened to its psychic babbling for a moment, and then I responded. "Yes, that's why we seem almost indestructible, because of our *joie de vivre*. Very good! You remembered *that* word from last time; smarter than your average maggot as I always say. That's me—pedagogue to pupae—I think I've finally found my calling." It communicated with me once again, and I answered this question too. "Yes, I did use *puke* in a bad sense. I'm sorry if I confused you." I felt its mind again and threw it on the ground as it began counting to 100. "Absolutely correct," I replied as I dived into the swirling mass, "now *you're* it."

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Rifts® captures the elements of magic and the supernatural and combines them with science fiction and high technology.

The Palladium mega-damage system applies to both magic and technology, creating super powerful characters of all kinds. The fact that the same basic RPG system links *all* of our games means that players can bring in any Palladium character from any Palladium role-playing game. Aspects of multi-dimensional travel is a constant element of the game.

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